Protection

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/2390837.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/F
Fandom:	Kill la Kill
Relationship:	Kiryuuin Satsuki/Matoi Ryuuko
Characters:	Matoi Ryuuko, Kiryuuin Satsuki, Mankanshoku Mako, Hououmaru Rei, Inumuta Houka, Gamagoori Ira, Jakuzure Nonon, Sanageyama Uzu, Harime Nui, Ogure Maiko, Hakodate Omiko, Fukuroda Takaharu, Iori Shirou, Kiryuuin Ragyo, Senketsu
Additional Tags:	Dystopian Near-Future AU, Intrigue, Action, Action/Adventure, Corporate Espionage, Romance
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2014-10-02 Updated: 2016-03-27 Words: 52,756 Chapters: 18/?

Protection

by margot16

Summary

Ryuko Matoi might have bitten off more than she can chew when she becomes the new security chief of Kiryuin Technologies. A near-future semi-dystopian AU featuring themes of romance, corporate espionage, action, and intrigue.

Inception

It is a time of duality.

While technological advancement and economic prosperity are at an all-time high, corporate influence and competition now dominate everyday life, making the governments of the world nearly obsolete.

Covert espionage and proxy warfare between corporations is commonplace, and vast swaths of the Earth's land are owned and controlled by global mega-corporations.

It is in this world that there exists a small, upstart corporation: Kiryuin Technologies.

It is in this world that our story takes place.

"Ms. Matoi?"

She looked up quickly, lightly brushing hair away from her eyes. Meeting the gaze of the pretty receptionist, she smirked, but only for a second.

"They'll see you now, ma'am."

This was the interview of a lifetime. Kiryuin Technologies was one of the most talked about new corporations in every aspect, and the job of security chief was just the thing Ryuko Matoi needed to enter the private sector. She was more than prepared, having memorized her resume fully. Yet as she stood up from the comfortable leather chair and made her way to the office door, fixing her hair and smoothing her pressed suit, she gritted her teeth in

anticipation. Perhaps it was how different the nature of the corporate world was. Perhaps it was the pressure of working for a top-notch company.

Or perhaps it was because the CEO of Kiryuin Technologies, Satsuki Kiryuin, with her face plastered on every magazine and vid screen from here to Hong Kong so that no one could *possibly* miss it, was the most beautiful woman Ryuko had ever seen.

It was probably the last one.

Ryuko shook her head, clearing it of any thoughts other than the task at hand. She entered the office of the COO confidently, sitting down at the one chair set in the middle of the room under a single light. Opposite her, behind a desk, was a smallish woman with dark skin and white hair done up in neat curls, with large yellowish glasses and a prim brown business suit. She was sitting under the only other light illuminating the shadowy room. Ryuko scanned her surroundings, her heart rate increasing slightly when she noticed a shadowy figure sitting shrouded in darkness in a far-off corner to her right.

She couldn't make out any details, other than that the figure was female, had long muscular legs, and was holding a teacup and saucer in her lap. However, before she could take in any further details, the woman at the desk spoke.

"Ms. Matoi. Or should I say Captain Matoi."

Ryuko's head snapped back to face the woman at the desk at the mention of her former rank. She couldn't help but smirk.

"I am Rei Hououmaru, COO of Kiryuin Technologies. I must say captain, you have quite the impressive file here."

Ryuko's smirk grew slightly bigger and she snorted, crossing her arms.

"I'm not a captain anymore, ma'am." She said, her reply dripping with sarcasm.

"I can see that. You're former JSDF, correct? Counter-terrorism and special operations, trained individually by not only the German Bundeswehr Special Operations Division but also the US Navy SEALs. You were discharged with full honors after the military reformation, yes?"

Ryuko looked away at nothing in particular, somewhat uncomfortable with having her whole history read aloud to her. What was more, none of that was included on the resume she sent in. These corporate types played a serious game.

"I also had rice with breakfast this morning, you guys know about that too?" Ryuko said.

She heard a quiet snort emanate from the shadowy figure's place in the room, before Hououmaru continued.

"Age: 26. By 16 you dropped out of high school to pursue a career in the military, forging documents allowing you into service at such a young age. You easily excelled in the physical and weapons-based portions of your service, and climbed the ladder at an astonishing rate despite several instances of insubordination. By 18 you were selected for service in the JSDF's elite counter-terrorism unit, fighting radicals both home and abroad attached to multiple militaries."

"At 23 your father, Major General Isshin Matoi, was killed by anti-corporate radicals in Vietnam while on parade. Since then you've made it your goal to eliminate these radicals at any cost, resulting in several instances of, according to your superiors, 'endangering teammates and blatantly disobeying orders'. You were discharged during reformation last year, your usefulness to the ailing Japanese government at an end as they transitioned to privatized military options."

Ryuko's jaw was set hard. They really did know everything about her.

"Does this all seem quite accurate, Ms. Matoi?"

Ryuko scowled, her arms still folded. "Yes, ma'am." was all she could manage.

"I have some important questions for you, Matoi. Are you prepared to answer them truthfully and without delay?"

It took Ryuko a second to realize that the voice speaking now was one that belonged to the shadowy figure in the corner. She turned to face that dark corner, the sound of a different voice and her imagination making her heart rate increase. "What is it?"

"Can you effectively separate emotion from your work?"

"Yes."

"Can you think independently and lead others while remaining loyal to our cause?"

"Yes."

"Finally...are you quite comfortable with the idea of killing people for money?"

Ryuko's smirk morphed into a devilish grin, balling her fists and setting them on her legs.

"Absolutely."

Ryuko heard a deep breath come from the shadowy corner as the figure stood, placing the teacup and saucer on a side table.

Clack. Clack. Clack.

The figure's heels rang out as she made her way towards Ryuko, becoming more and more visible. The tall woman was wearing a tight skirt that ended just below her knees, accentuating her shapely hips and powerful thighs. A blazer covered her upper half, her long black hair draped neatly forward over her shoulders. As her face finally entered the range of visibility, Ryuko's breath caught in her throat.

The woman was incredibly beautiful, every bit the picture of power and severe beauty portrayed on magazine covers and vid screens. Her features were sharp, her skin flawless and porcelain white. She had large eyebrows over her piercing cobalt-blue eyes, and her visage was graced by a small smile. As the woman extended her hand gracefully towards Ryuko, her mind succumbed completely to the tall woman's undeniable charm. There was no doubt about it, this was-

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Satsuki Kiryuin, owner and CEO of Kiryuin Technologies. I'm glad to welcome you to the team, Matoi."

Ryuko could hardly believe how quickly things were progressing. After the interview and being hired *on the spot*, Ryuko had been whisked away from Satsuki (disappointingly) and paired with the woman who would be her personal assistant henceforth. She was a bubbly sort, clearly the kind of person to always be cheerful and kind to everyone around her. After an initially strange and jarring first meeting, Ryuko reluctantly took to her and embraced the woman's new position at her side. Her name was Mako Mankanshoku, and Ryuko was deep in confused thought when her high-pitched voice broke through as they were walking to their destination.

"Did you get the orientation schedule from Human Resources, Ms. Matoi?" She asked cheerfully.

"Huh? Oh, uh...yeah I did. Oh and Mako, you can just call me Ryuko if you want. 'Ms. Matoi' is a little too school-teachery for my blood."

Mako laughed squeakily. "Sounds good to me, Ryuko-chan!"

Ryuko chuckled slightly at her sudden familiarity. She liked Mako, and she was glad to find that they weren't going to have any problems with her being "too" official.

"Mako, can you give me a quick rundown on what we're doing the next few days? I don't feel like reading all this stuff right now." Ryuko said as they walked, rubbing her eyes with her thumb and forefinger.

Mako smiled wide, before putting a finger to her chin inquisitively. "Hmmm, let's see. Well, today is mostly the boring old orientation stuff, some lectures from Human Resources and mandatory reading and whatnot. Tomorrow's where all the fun begins! You'll get to meet the rest of the security team that'll be serving under you, run through some weapons familiarization, and then you're going right out on an individual detail with Ms. Kiryuin herself! Sounds like a fun day to me..."

She trailed off into cheerful humming as they entered the elevator at the end of the hall. Ryuko absentmindedly flipped through some of the literature she was given, not paying attention to anything in particular. She hated that she couldn't shake the instant attraction she had had to the CEO. Her unforgettable face had dominated her thoughts since the moment she first saw it months ago, and now that she had met her in person that feeling was only stronger.

"Ryuko-chan, are you comin'?" Mako said for what must have been the third time. They had arrived at their floor.

"Let's get this over with." Ryuko said with a sigh.

She would have plenty of time to think about Kiryuin tonight.

To say it was a long day was a gross understatement, but to if Ryuko was being completely honest with herself it wasn't anything worse than what she was used to. She had to admit

however that she would much rather jump out of a plane, track down a criminal, or throw herself into some other death-defying scenario than sit through 8 more hours of training and orientation like she had done today. There's nothing quite so boring to a soldier as paperwork.

Her first "grueling" day as Kiryuin Technologies' chief of security now over, Ryuko was comfortably resting in her newly moved-into apartment. It was a little odd being sort of a wandering vagabond and actually, finally having a permanent place of residence. As a result, the apartment was somewhat spartan due to the fact that she had very little possessions. The kind of life she had been leading up until this point didn't leave much to cling to.

Ryuko had just begun to settle in to a glass of stiff bourbon and the daily news on her tablet when she heard a sharp knock at her door. Her head whipped around, immediately preparing herself for any eventuality. She cautiously made her way to the peephole, picking her sidearm up from the counter as she went.

However, her worries were quickly assuaged upon realizing it was just a courier. She cracked the door, the courier smiling warmly at her.

"Matoi?" He said.

"Uh, yeah." Ryuko said carefully, placing her sidearm out of eyeshot of the courier so as not to alarm him.

She signed for an envelope with a small rectangular bulge in it, and the courier left as quickly as he came. Ryuko made her way back to the couch, tearing one side off and sliding the object out. It was an onyx-black, nondescript, yet very sleek smartphone. What was more, it was a brand she had never seen in any market before. Flipping it over, she saw a single etched "K" in a stylized font, but before she could explore further the phone began to vibrate.

Frowning, Ryuko peered at the screen, seeing one word in the caller ID display: "Hououmaru".

"Hello?"

"Ah, Matoi. It seems you've received the phone as planned. It's a prototype, so *do* be careful with it."

"Uh, yeah sure. What's all this about?" Ryuko asked, still confused.

"Consider it a gift from the company, Matoi. This will replace whatever phone you're currently using, and as a result said phone must be disposed of in a destructive manner immediately. This model has upgraded security features that aren't on the market yet, and will provide a highly secure method of communication with the company and beyond. What's more, Lady Satsuki would like an audience with you. You're to go to her personal residence immediately."

Ryuko stared off into space, her heart once again jumping into the back of her throat.

"Y-you mean *her* place? Why?" Ryuko stammered.

"Lady Satsuki can be enigmatic at times, and as a result her motivations escape me in this instance, to be completely honest. My advice to you would be to drop whatever you're doing and get there immediately, Matoi. The address is in your messages."

Ryuko's heart began to race faster as she clenched her free hand into a fist, preparing to move out.

"Right, I'm on it. Thanks for the phone." Ryuko said, hanging up. Donning her sidearm around her shoulder in its holster, she threw on her favorite black and white patterned leather jacket and some jeans before making her way out. The new phone sat like a brick in her pocket as she made to leave.

"Ah yes, Ms. Matoi. Lady Satsuki is just finishing up in the shower, please come in and have a seat. Might I interest you in a drink?"

The friendly butler motioned Ryuko across the threshold and into the cavernous living area of the penthouse apartment, every bit as large and picturesque as one would expect for the CEO of a corporation. She was already tipsy from her previous drink but the thought of more liquid courage seemed appropriate given the unusual circumstances.

"I'll take some whiskey on the rocks if you have it, uh...?"

"Soroi, Ms. Matoi. We have a very fine Scotch vintage, I shall fetch a glass for you." Soroi said before bowing and exiting the room.

Ryuko slipped her jacket off, placing it on the back of the long couch before making her way over to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Tokyo's sprawl. She gladly accepted the drink from Soroi, who once again bowed and exited, leaving Ryuko alone with her own thoughts for a moment. She watched the lights of the huge metropolis twinkling below her, remarking once again on how different the private sector was. A simple soldier like herself could get used to such lavish treatment.

"It is quite the view, isn't it?" A husky voice from behind her said.

Ryuko whirled around, a bit startled by the voice even though she recognized it immediately. Satsuki Kiryuin was standing there before her, and just the sight of her made Ryuko's breath stop. She was drying her long hair slowly with a towel, clothed only in a loose-fitting bathrobe tied at the waste. A generous amount of cleavage was visible from where Ryuko was standing, making her face flush.

"M-Ms. Kiryuin! I, uh...uhm, thank you for inviting me over. This whiskey is delicious...a-and your apartment is quite impressive!" Ryuko stammered nervously, trying to turn both the conversation and her gaze away from the older woman before her.

"Ryuko, please. Call me Satsuki. Surely you must know that I didn't invite you here simply to admire my apartment, though it is appreciated all the same. I want to get to know you a bit

better, as I regret our meeting earlier today was cut short. Please, have a seat." She said, gesturing at the couch and smiling that small smile again, driving Ryuko only *slightly* crazy.

"Yes, of course ma'am-I-I mean Satsuki." Ryuko said, making her way to the couch and plopping down comfortably. Satsuki exited the room briefly, returning with a large bottle of champagne and two flutes. Ryuko's eyebrows raised slightly and, seeing her surprise, Satsuki set to quell her confusion.

"I figured we could celebrate your addition to our little experiment. After all, it's not every day we get to have an ex-special forces soldier protecting all of us, is it?" She said as she gracefully sat down what felt like mere inches from Ryuko, pouring them both generous glasses of champagne and handing Ryuko a flute. She then raised her glass towards Ryuko, smiling warmly despite her cold, piercing eyes.

"To the future." Satsuki said before they both downed their glasses in one.

Ryuko sat there for hours in that weirdly familiar environment with one of the most powerful people in the world, getting more and more inebriated as time went on, talking about everything under the sun. Her exploits in the military, her family life, even romance (what little of it could be found in the military). Every subject was covered and after a couple of hours, the tense atmosphere had deflated significantly and everything had the air of two friends talking. There then came a long, calm pause that was broken by Satsuki.

"I need someone who will keep us safe, Ryuko."

Ryuko looked at Satsuki, staring into the ice-blue orbs that were her eyes. Even though they were as cold as the void of space, they burned with an intensity that was very familiar to Ryuko.

"I can do that, Satsuki. I'll keep you and everyone else in one piece." Ryuko said, smirking.

Lost in Satsuki's eyes, Ryuko didn't notice just how close together they were on the couch now. She *almost* didn't notice when she felt a slender hand come to rest gently on her thigh, glancing down at it nervously before returning her gaze to Satsuki's beautiful face.

"I need someone who can keep *me* safe, Ryuko. There are a lot of bad, powerful people out there. They are the ones who hold the reins of power in this world. I want to take that power from them, and they want me and everyone I'm associated with dead because of it. Soon you, I and our entire company might make enemies of the *entire world*. Can you handle those odds?" Satsuki said, her face mere inches from Ryuko's now.

"I'm no stranger to those kind of odds." Ryuko breathed.

Ryuko's heart pounded in her ears. She had no idea how it had gotten to this, but she was powerless to fight it. Satsuki's charisma and charm were absolutely undeniable. This was the case before Ryuko had even met her, and it was fully solidified now.

"Good. I've been watching your exploits for a long time, *Captain* Matoi. I've wanted you at my side since the moment I first laid eyes on you. And if there is one thing you would do well to understand about me, *Ryuko*, it's that I will never stop until I have what I want. Do you understand?" Satsuki said breathily, Ryuko able to smell the sweet scent of alcohol on her breath. She cupped a slender hand around Ryuko's cheek while she waited for her answer.

"Yes, ma'am..." was all Ryuko managed to get out before their lips touched, and she relished in giving herself up completely to the tall, slender, beautiful porcelain-skinned angel before her.

No, angel wasn't quite right. Perhaps a more appropriate term was...*Queen.*

Control over oneself is so overrated, Ryuko thought.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy

The elevator hummed softly as it made its way to its destination. Ryuko leaned her back against the wall of the small, mirrored box and absentmindedly fingered the hem of her jacket. She was still in the street clothes she had left her apartment in yesterday, however they had somehow ended up being cleaner than when she had put them on originally. Satsuki's butler was...almost *creepy* good, as she had awoken to find her clothes washed, dried and pressed, her leather jacket folded neatly on top of her jeans and nondescript t-shirt. The motions of her hand stopped as she thought further of Satsuki.

Ms. Kiryuin. Owner and CEO of the company Ryuko now worked for, Kiryuin Technologies. And apparently now, Ryuko's lover as well. It would all be a little too much for someone who wasn't a trained soldier, who hadn't been trained to turn their mind into a steel trap and to expect the unexpected at all times. Still, it threw Ryuko for a loop. The previous night, as Satsuki had poured champagne and confessed her long-held desire for Ryuko even though they had only just met, Ryuko had been powerless to resist her. It was plainly obvious that this was the case; Ryuko had been mildly obsessed with Satsuki ever since her beautiful face had started appearing everywhere in the public sphere: the internet, magazines, vid screens. Satsuki was everything Ryuko had dreamed she would be, and more.

Last night they had *done* everything Ryuko could dream of as well. Ryuko couldn't remember the last time she had been treated in such a way: doted on, controlled, given control, pleasured in ways that she had not even considered possible. Satsuki was experienced in a way that only she could be, after all: intelligent, regal, in control at all times. Ryuko felt her heart rate rise slightly, halting all thought and taking several slow, deep breaths to settle herself. She imagined her right eye in front of a scope, the day ahead in the crosshairs. She would be damned if she let her thoughts come through while meeting her new team.

As if on cue, the doors of the elevator opened with a "ding" and Ryuko was faced with her assistant Mako, a wide and welcoming smile on her face.

"Good morning, Ryuko-chan! Are you ready to meet the Four?" Mako said cheerily.

Ryuko cocked her head, confused by Mako's vernacular.

"The Four?" she said, her eyebrows scrunching together.

"Oh, sorry. I forget this is only your second day. You just fit in so well around here already that it feels like you've been here a while!" she squeaked joyfully, her smile growing ever wider. Ryuko couldn't help but grin, becoming more appreciative of Mako's complementary and positive demeanor as time went on.

"We call them the Four because there are four of them, which is pretty obvious I guess. They're your new team! Though I suppose we're gonna have to call you guys the Five now..." Mako said pressing a finger to her lips thoughtfully as they walked.

About halfway down the hall the two came to a large set of thick steel doors, secured by a sophisticated electronic locking mechanism. Mako handed Ryuko a card, indicating that she should swipe it through the mechanism so that they may gain entry. Doing so caused the two thick doors to slide open quickly, revealing a large room with a high ceiling, filled with everything a small team might need to wage corporate warfare and espionage on a contained but destructive scale.

Racks and racks of every kind of small arms weapon lined one wall, complete with workbenches for customization and even a small firing range. There was a modest built-out office that sat in one corner, and down another wall was a large projection screen, in front of which was a sizable holo-table for briefings and planning sessions. Interspersed throughout the cavernous room were various kinds of training equipment, fitness devices and other implements used to hone skills and sharpen senses.

However most surprising was the presence of a smallish tilt-jet aircraft, its wings folded back for storage. It was just a bit larger than the average moving van, painted matte black and clearly a prototype of cutting-edge design. To go along with it a large section of the rear wall of the room was dedicated to the function of a fold-down landing pad and launch ramp, the use of which was sure to be incredibly convenient for emergencies or quick mobilizations.

Ryuko couldn't help but let her mouth fall open at the modernity and well-equipped nature of her new base of operations. It was certainly much more sophisticated than anything she experienced in the military, and she chalked it all up to the massive amounts of money corporations had to dedicate to the defense of their assets. Ryuko continued to look around the large room for several further moments before her eyes finally rested on four strangely

assorted figures clustered about the center of the room, all looking at her with a range of expressions from skepticism to outright contempt.

"Alright you four, form up and prepare to meet your new commander!" Mako said with a forcefulness totally unlike her, shaking Ryuko from her reverie.

The four slowly made their way over to Ryuko and Mako, forming up in a rough line in front of the two of them. Ryuko looked each of them up and down as Mako began introductions.

"Captain Ryuko Matoi, I'd like you to meet your new Elite Four." she said proudly.

"First off, I'd like to introduce Ira Gamagoori. Born to American and Japanese parents, he served two tours with the US Army Rangers before accepting the job with Kiryuin Technologies. He'll be your heavy weapons and demolition expert."

The impossibly large man bowed his head slightly, greeting Ryuko with a cross the chest salute and a "Captain." Ryuko returned with a nod.

"Next up, Houka Inumuta. A former member of the infamous PLA hacking Unit 61398 under contract, he's the best of the best in the fields of hacking and logistics. He'll be your go-to for electronic and cyber warfare, as well as handling all field logistics and piloting the tilt-jet."

Inumuta used his thumb and forefinger to push his glasses up on his nose, nodding.

"Uzu Sanageyama. He's a former Yakuza lieutenant that escaped a life of street crime for the world of corporate security and espionage. He's a kendo world champion and is deadly at close range, specializing in CQB, hand-to-hand and close-range combat. Also a renowned survivalist."

Sanageyama crossed his powerful arms, appraising Ryuko with his piercing eyes. He nodded, giving her a curt "Matoi."

"Finally, Nonon Jakuzure. She's a former deep-cover operative and double agent for several notorious defense contractors. An expert in stealth, infiltration, and reconnaissance. She's deadly with a sniper rifle and even deadlier with a knife."

Ryuko had to move the angle of her gaze slightly downward to take in the short, svelte pink-haired girl before her. She deftly twirled a white-handled, black-bladed dagger in her hand, staring at Ryuko with a deep scowl on her face. She said nothing. Mako looked to Ryuko expectantly, signalling it was her turn to address her new team for the first time. Ryuko took a confident step forward, taking in a deep breath and drawing herself up to her full height. When she spoke, her voice filled the room.

"Alright you four, this is how it's gonna be. Despite what all our backgrounds are and how different they might be, we're all workin' private sector now and we're all workin' here. That means we have to work together, and we have to do it well. As a result, here's how our team structure will work: no ranks, no special privileges, no bullshit. You see somethin' wrong, you tell me. You don't like somethin' I'm doing, you tell me. So long as you all understand that I'm the one connecting us five to the orders coming from the top, then we'll all get along. I know what it's like living under a rank-and-file military system and frankly, it won't work here. We're an independent team with independent goals, so we'd better start acting like it. Got it?"

The four in front of her looked a bit taken aback to say the least. Ryuko was sure that when they had heard a former special forces soldier was coming to be their new commander, they weren't expecting her to arrive and immediately abolish any semblance of conventional military command structures in one fell swoop.

"Any questions?" Ryuko asked, placing her hands on her hips and smirking.

"Yeah, I got one."

The smallest of them, Jakuzure, stepped forward so as to be inches from Ryuko's face. Ryuko's smirk grew even wider as she stared into the shorter girl's eyes while she appraised Ryuko.

"You serious?" Jakuzure asked in a nasally, high-pitched voice that so matched her size.

Ryuko snorted, looking over the four of them so as to emphasize her point.

"Completely."

Nonon sneered, twirling her onyx blade as she returned to the others. The four of them semi-huddled, deliberating for about thirty seconds before the green-haired one, Sanageyama, stepped forward.

"Got another one, Sanageyama?" Ryuko asked skeptically.

Uzu's mouth broke into a wide, flashy smile as he crossed his muscular arms across his chest.

"Yeah. When do we start, Matoi?"

Ryuko's smirk grew into a full-on sneer, which was reciprocated by the entire team before her.

She was going to like this job.

Ryuko always hated her dress uniform. It was hot, it was itchy, and it was just so god damned *official*. It was a bland and boring olive drab, consisting of a long skirt that ended just below the knees, a suit-style coat jacket with broad shoulders, black tie and white shirt, and a black and drab officer's cap that she carried under one arm as she busily made her way to the top of the Kiryuin Technologies building. She understood why she was asked to wear it: it was a play for legitimacy, a show for the masses and a warning for the ever-watchful eyes of those in power. An announcement to the world that an experienced and deadly soldier was the new

chief of security at Kiryuin technologies. What a fitting way to make her presence felt, as well. She was about to escort Satsuki on her first individual security detail.

Ryuko felt the comfortable weight of her sidearm in its holster, hidden beneath her dress jacket. It was her father's sidearm before hers: a US-issue Colt M1911 .45 caliber handgun. Simple, effective, powerful and proven. It acted as much as her protection as it did a banner for her cause, the elimination and humiliation of the same anti-corporate radicals that had killed her father. Ryuko gritted her teeth, clearing her head of those negative thoughts. She had arrived at the CEO's office, which took up the entire top floor of the building. Ryuko's heart raced at the thought of seeing Satsuki again. The previous night's events danced briefly though her brain as she swiped her keycard and swung open the large mahogany door.

Satsuki's tall, powerful form was framed by the large floor-to-ceiling window behind her desk, enveloping her in a yellow-white glow that accentuated her grace and poise. She wore what Ryuko had come to understand was commonplace for her: a professional business suit, with a tight skirt that ended about knee-length and a blazer that accentuated her ample bust and broad shoulders.

"Ryuko. Thank you for coming." She said, a small smile flitting across her face. Ryuko blushed and suddenly became very interested in a very specific bit of *nothing* in the corner of the room.

"Ms. Kiryuin. Are you ready, ma'am?" She said quietly.

"Of course. This speech won't give itself, after all." Satsuki returned, looking only slightly amused. Her heels clacked as she walked toward the door, Ryuko opening it for her as she left the cavernous office.

Walking down the hall towards the elevator, the only sounds present were the clacking of Satsuki's heels and the soft sound of Ryuko's own breathing. Ryuko snuck a glance at Satsuki's face, and blushed in surprised when Satsuki's cobalt-blue eyes met her own and held them for a bit too long. Satsuki then looked Ryuko up and down once or twice, putting on her signature small, demure smile. Ryuko's heart leapt into her throat, finding that she was immediately (and embarrassingly) aroused. As they entered the elevator to make their way down, Satsuki spoke in a husky voice that made Ryuko's insides burn.

"You know, I've always had a thing for women in uniform." she said just as the doors closed, taking hold of Ryuko's eyes with her own once again and holding her in a trance-like state. Ryuko licked her lips nervously, her mind flitting about trying to come up with a witty response while her face continued to heat up. She smirked, throwing out her answer to Satsuki's challenge with all the confidence she could muster.

"I don't believe you." Ryuko said simply, her eyes burning with passion and her fists balled, knuckles bone white. Satsuki snorted in amusement, her smile growing even larger. Ryuko nearly fainted when Satsuki reached into her pocket and winked at her, pulling out her own security keycard. Ryuko knew in that exact instant what Satsuki's game was. She planned to stop the elevator.

Satsuki waved her keycard near the bank of buttons, and before the elevator had fully come to a stop, Satsuki and Ryuko met in the middle, kissing frantically.

"W-We're gonna have to be quick-" Ryuko huffed, before moaning as Satsuki kissed the soft skin of her neck.

"I can be as fast or as slow as you like, *Captain*." Satsuki returned sultrily, biting down on the flesh of Ryuko's neck as she said the last word. Ryuko usually hated being called by her rank but there was something about the way Satsuki said it that made her go completely insane. Ryuko moaned even louder, filling the small space with the husky sound.

Mere seconds later their mouths were pressed together again, their tongues dancing around each other in a passionate ballet. Satsuki deftly unbuttoned Ryuko's uniform jacket, using her right hand to cup an ample breast through Ryuko's uniform shirt. She let Ryuko place passionate, almost desperate kisses along her own slender neck as her elegant hands worked to undo the buttons of Ryuko's shirt. This time Satsuki's quiet, deep moans filled the elevator as well.

She left the tie tied, managing to pull the shirt to the side, exposing one cup of Ryuko's black bra. Folding the soft cup down, she finally exposed one of Ryuko's shapely breasts, their eyes meeting once again. Ryuko's eyes burned with a passion they had not had since long before she could remember, and she used them to plead with Satsuki.

Do it. Please.

Satsuki obliged, placing her pouting mouth on the soft flesh of Ryuko's nipple and sucking. She ran her tongue around Ryuko's areola before biting softly, Ryuko's moans becoming more and more pronounced. Her right hand now free, Satsuki lifted the hem of Ryuko's skirt so that her underwear was exposed, slipping several slender fingers inside it with the ease and grace of someone who had done this many times before.

Ryuko could barely stand, but Satsuki was expertly multitasking as if three people were pleasing her at once instead of only one. She felt one arm around her waist to steady her, the pleasing sensation of Satsuki's warm mouth working the soft flesh of her breast, and finally her other hand exploring her nether regions. Entering her, teasing her. It was all almost too much for her to bear.

"Agh, S-Satsuki...you're a-amazing..." Ryuko stammered, feeling a fire beginning to burn in her lower half that threatened to engulf her. With a sucking *snap*, Satsuki unlatched herself from Ryuko's breast and returned her face level to Ryuko's, staring deep into her eyes. Her pace down below slowed, teasing Ryuko and making her squirm.

"*You* are pretty amazing too, you know. I wasn't lying when I said I've been watching you for a long time. In fact, I'd say I'm obsessed."

Ryuko began to giggle between moans, meeting Satsuki's eyes again as she continued to work.

"It's funny. Ever since your face started showing up everywhere I looked, I've been obsessed with you too. I've had...a lot of dreams about you, Satsuki."

Satsuki smiled, planting her mouth once again on Ryuko's and increasing her pace. Ryuko moaned into Satsuki's mouth as they kissed, before Satsuki pulled away and maneuvered her mouth into Ryuko's ear. Hearing and feeling Satsuki's soft breath there was already too much, but it was what came next that finally threw Ryuko over the edge.

"Perhaps I shall give you more to dream about, then." she said, and Ryuko melted.

"Y-Yes, please...more." Ryuko begged, her moans and gasps becoming louder and more desperate.

Satsuki shifted once again to work Ryuko's breast with her mouth, her fingers moving from playing with Ryuko to fully entering her, rubbing her most sensitive parts as they did. Ryuko moaned louder and loader with each penetration, her left hand gripping the railing of the elevator, her right flung up over her head in pure ecstasy. Satsuki brought Ryuko to a loud, explosive climax, feeling Ryuko tense up around her fingers as she rode through the intense concentric waves of her orgasm.

Ryuko felt Satsuki hold her, envelop her as she shuddered in place, her yelps decreasing to moans and finally down into heavy breathing. Gathering herself, Ryuko realized that this little diversion must have cost them a significant chunk of their schedule. She began putting herself back together as Satsuki planted one last passionate kiss on her lips, starting the elevator once again. Ryuko was impressed by just how careful Satsuki had been with her: Only what was essential had been undone, and it took her less than a minute to get back to her former prim and proper status.

Satsuki looked her up and down once again approvingly, her expression resolute.

"Ready yourself, Captain. We're about to show you to the world for the first time. There's no telling what could happen. Are you prepared for any eventuality?"

Ryuko clenched her fists, feeling even better about the day ahead. She was fully prepared.

"I'm ready. Let's do it."

Breach

"Today we not only break ground on a new Kiryuin Technologies facility, we also break ground on a bright and promising future for Japan and eventually, the world. Thank you for joining us for what promises to be the beginning of an exciting and ambitious voyage for us all."

Ryuko had to admit, Satsuki's delivery was flawless. She couldn't say she was surprised: Ryuko had heard many of her speeches in the past, though none of them in person. There was a certain magnetism from seeing her do it live that was undeniable.

Satsuki's words weren't Ryuko's focus at the moment, however. Feeling the weight of her sidearm pressed comfortably against her upper ribs, she scanned the crowd like a hawk seeking prey. Ryuko had only one focus now, standing to the rear and right of Satsuki on the stage: protect the CEO. The stage was situated in front of an empty lot, which was itself bordering a large public square in the heart of the city. They were ringed in by buildings on all sides, the midday sun beating down on the assembled crowd of onlookers.

Ryuko mostly focused her attention on the parts of the crowd closest to her: people who were within a stone's throw of Satsuki herself, even though she was raised up on a stage in front of them. As Satsuki continued to deliver her flawless speech, Ryuko continued to stand behind her, scanning. Her stoic guardian, her protector. Ryuko had a bad feeling that something would be rearing its ugly head today. In this new world of constant inter-corporate violence, a public event like this would be the perfect place to stage an assassination attempt.

Ryuko would be goddamned if she let that happen.

It wasn't until she had done what must have been dozens of scans of the crowd that she saw him. At first she thought it might have been nothing, but double-checking his appearance was the right decision. He was wearing a leather jacket *over* a hoodie, which was pulled up to partially conceal his identity. The weather was warm today, definitely nowhere near cold enough to double such thick layers. There was also a bulge near the right side of his breast, indicating something shoved inside the leather jacket hastily. Ryuko's heart began beating faster, her eyes narrowing.

It was then that she saw it. His smile. It was wide and contorted, almost comical. It grew wider as he zipped the leather jacket down slightly, reaching inside. Laughter began to spill out of the man's mouth, loud and cackling. It was audible even over Satsuki's amplified speech, and the crowd began to look around in confusion, trying to find the source of the disturbance. Laughing even louder, the man reached inside his jacket, removing a glinting metal object and beginning to raise it into his line of sight.

That was all Ryuko needed to see.

Unsheathing her sidearm, she felt its comforting weight as she raised it in both her hands and took a sweeping step forward. It took less than one second, but it felt like an hour as Ryuko centered the sights on the laughing man's head, his arm still raising the gun in slow motion. Ryuko took a short, controlled breath, and with a twitch of her right index finger, she pulled the trigger. Feeling the gun buck in her hand, she expertly controlled the recoil, preparing to fire consecutive shots if need be.

The man dropped almost instantly, the gun in his hand clattering to the ground before it could do any harm. Blood, brain and viscera sprayed several bystanders behind Ryuko's target, but no one seemed to be hurt. Within seconds of the entire sequence of events, the crowd exploded. Screams echoed through the air as hundreds of people clambered over each other, trying to scramble to some imagined safety. It was exactly fifteen seconds after Ryuko had spotted the first man that her worst fears came to pass.

"DEATH TO CORPORATE OVERLORDS!" came an angered, slathering cry to Ryuko's immediate left.

Whipping around, Ryuko's heart stopped. Another radical had managed to slip onstage, and now had a gun drawn on Satsuki at point blank range. His face was painted with that same insane grin as he screamed. Ryuko slammed her sidearm back into place in her hands, but froze as she realized Satsuki was perfectly between her and her new target. There was no way she was going to take the gunman down before he managed to get a shot off. He already had his gun raised, finger on the trigger.

Satsuki was going to die, and it would be all her fault.

Satsuki had other plans, however, and if Ryuko blinked she would have missed them spring into action. Striking with her right palm, Satsuki unleashed a devastating series of blows: first knocking the gun away, then breaking the man's arm as if it were made of balsa wood. To finish him off, she threw the now screaming man over her shoulder with all her might, using his broken arm as leverage. He landed with a heavy *thud* in front of Ryuko, now knocked unconscious. The crowd continued to panic around them, police rushing in to apprehend the man who was still alive and attempt to control the crowd as best they can.

Ryuko and Satsuki remained still, Ryuko slowly meeting Satsuki's eyes. Ryuko's look of shock was written plainly on her face, while Satsuki's face bared no expression at all. They remained there, rooted on the spot, staring into each other's eyes for numerous long seconds before Ryuko dashed forward and grabbed Satsuki by the arm.

"We've got to get you to safety!" Ryuko yelled over the din of the crowd, pulling Satsuki down and off the stage. She frantically spoke into the microbead communicator in her ear, coordinating with the driver of the limousine that brought them there.

"Yes, there's been an incident and Ms. Kiryuin's safety is compromised. Bring the car to the rear of the designated alleyway and prepare to move out as soon as we're in. Destination is my apartment. Yes, I know. Just get on it."

Ryuko caught a confused and slightly amused look of inquisition from Satsuki, placating her for the time being.

"Look, my apartment's gonna be the safest place for you right now. No one knows about me yet, so we'll hide out there for the night until we know for sure that you're safe. Plus...you're in no position to question me after the shit you pulled back there. Why the hell do you even need me?"

Ryuko's grip tightened on Satsuki's arm, before Satsuki gently placed a hand on top of Ryuko's, disarming her. Ryuko looked back at Satsuki in time to see her give her signature small smile, choosing to take Ryuko's hand off her arm and place it in her own. Ryuko blushed slightly, still frowning and keeping up their pace. She wouldn't let anything happen now, just as they were to make their escape.

"I'm sorry, Ryuko. But surely you don't think I'm *that* helpless. Sometimes measures must be taken to be able to protect one's life outside traditional means. But what I said still holds true. I hired you for protection. For me, and for everyone at Kiryuin Technologies. And we *both* saw that play out today. I would be dead if it weren't for you spotting that man in the crowd. Your quick judgement saved us both...though you did have a bit of help, I suppose."

As they neared the waiting limo, Ryuko shook her head and couldn't help but laugh out loud. Her laughing was cut short, however, when she felt Satsuki pull on her arm, yanking her into a secluded alcove just before where the limo was parked. With speed that resembled her earlier feat, Satsuki swept Ryuko into her arms, cupping her chin and placing a firm, passionate kiss on her lips. Any vitriol and mistrust Ryuko had towards Satsuki melted away as her grip around the CEO's waist tightened.

Satsuki broke away as quickly as she had started, smiling.

"I'm sorry for all this. I know it's not exactly the usual first day on the job. Thank you for saving me."

Ryuko's blush deepened as she stared into Satsuki's stunningly beautiful, radiant face. Ryuko clasped Satsuki's hands in hers tightly.

"Just glad I could help. Let's get you to safety, *Ms. Kiryuin*."

For Your Eyes Only

Ryuko's apartment was quiet and very, very still. The only sounds Satsuki could hear were the holoscreen set up in the corner, the volume turned down so low so as to barely understand the sounds it was making, and Ryuko's soft muttering as she spoke quietly into her phone. The sun had long disappeared behind the horizon and Satsuki could spy the sparkling lights of Tokyo far below. Ryuko stood in front of the large floor-to-ceiling window, peering out through the small opening in the curtains and speaking to Inumuta about their next moves.

"Yes. Yes, I know. I'm telling you, Inumuta, they were anti-corp radicals. I know 'em when I see 'em. I need who hired them and what cell they belong to, *at least*. Send Gamagoori and Sanageyama over to the police precinct and see what they can get from the guy who's still alive. Yeah, I know. Tell 'em to drop my name, I know a guy down there. Alright. Let me know."

Ryuko let her hand drop from the side of her face, her Kiryuin Technologies phone hanging in the lazy grip of her hand. She sighed, puffing out her cheeks comically before smirking and placing her hands on her hips, shifting her weight onto one foot.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that?" Ryuko said, looking down at Satsuki sitting leisurely on the couch.

Satsuki had long ago changed out of her formal business attire, borrowing a plain red t-shirt and a pair of short workout shorts from Ryuko, both of which were only *slightly* too small for Satsuki's frame. Ryuko gulped as Satsuki looked up at her, taking a deep breath and causing her ample breasts to swell under the tight shirt. Satsuki followed Ryuko's eyes with hers, looking down at her bosom before meeting Ryuko's eyes with a snort of amusement. She smiled dazzlingly, sending Ryuko even further into a daze.

"You're not exactly a walk in the park either, Matoi." Satsuki said sarcastically as Ryuko chuckled and crossed the room to the small kitchen.

Satsuki couldn't help but bite her lower lip as Ryuko faced away from her, reaching up to the topmost cabinet and pawing at a bottle of bourbon. As she came back down from her tiptoes,

she used one hand to fix her panties, (Ryuko had refused to wear pants as soon as she set foot in her apartment) slipping one finger under the hem to straighten them.

Ryuko approached Satsuki, two glasses of bourbon on the rocks in hand. She handed one to Satsuki, before sitting opposite her on the couch and clinking glasses, enjoying a large gulp of the fiery liquid as it slid down her throat. Satsuki sniffed the unusual drink gingerly, before shrugging and taking a large sip like her counterpart. Satsuki shivered in delight as the drink warmed her body, Ryuko looking on in approval.

"So." Ryuko said firmly, meeting Satsuki's eyes and holding them.

"So." Satsuki returned, her face blank save for one corner of her mouth tilted upward.

"Tell me somethin'. Where the hell did you learn how to fight like that?" Ryuko asked plainly.

"Well," Satsuki began, "I've trained from a very young age in a variety of disciplines. Kendo, Wushu, Karate, even Capoeira. You name it, I've probably studied it at some point. Being a member of such a wealthy and influential family has its benefits, one of which is being able to hire the best of the best to train me. My family life always dictated that I be capable and strong, so that is what I am."

"Your family life? You must have a lot of brothers or something like that, right?" Ryuko asked, leaning forward inquisitively, now fully interested.

Satsuki placed the drink on her lap and clasped it in one hand, slowly turning and staring out the window.

"No. I am an only child. My mother, however..." Satsuki trailed off. Ryuko shifted in her seat, anxious.

"What's up with your mom?" She asked carefully, sensing trouble.

"My mother is, to put it simply, an abuser. She is and has always been sadistic, cruel, violent and vindictive. As you might imagine, she abused me from a young age in ways I care not to repeat or relive here. Growing up, I quickly learned that the only way to save myself from her whims was to better myself, physically and mentally. That was my own small victory against her, in a way. Ryuko, please don't underestimate my seriousness in saying that there will come a day that she falls before me and faces retribution for her crimes. That day is coming, and when it does it will be in no small part be a culmination of all these small victories I have afforded myself since childhood." Satsuki finished, letting her hardened words ring around the small space. She met Ryuko's eyes, and Ryuko could see nothing but ice and stone within them.

"Satsuki, I'm so-" Ryuko began, before Satsuki held up a hand and smiled knowingly.

"Ryuko, please. I do not need your pity nor will I accept it. It is an old and well-healed wound, and the scars only serve to further harden my resolve in the matters at hand today. She will get her just desserts, believe me. For now let us discuss other matters."

Ryuko slowly closed her mouth, nodding.

"Fair enough...I know how that is."

For a while the two simply sat in silence, watching the holoscreen passively and sipping their bourbon until both glasses had more melted ice than anything else. Ryuko set her glass down on the coffee table in front of them, leaning backwards and laying her upturned head in Satsuki's lap, smiling. Satsuki smiled back at her, stroking her hair absentmindedly, playing with Ryuko's solitary red streak.

Ryuko closed her eyes for a second, basking in the moment and taking solace in the fact that her and Satsuki shared more common ground than perhaps either of them initially realized. While past trauma wasn't necessarily something to celebrate, it bound the two girls together inexorably to the same path. Ryuko found herself trusting Satsuki more than she had trusted

anyone in her recent memory. It was an unusual feeling, especially to have for someone she had only met the previous day, but was certainly not unpleasant.

Ryuko opened her eyes slowly, leaning upwards and pulling Satsuki's face down with her hand for their lips to meet. They did, and the two could taste the freshly consumed bourbon on each other's lips. Ryuko shifted her body so she was kneeling next to Satsuki, their faces now level. Ryuko's hand snaked up to cup the underside of Satsuki's jaw, slowly introducing Satsuki's mouth to her tongue as she did.

Ryuko hesitated for a moment, fearing her duties as security chief might be falling by the wayside in favor of the beautiful woman before her. As their mouths entwined, Ryuko briefly went over a mental checklist to make sure they were as safe as they could possibly be. The three locks on the door were latched, alarms were set in both the hallway and inside the apartment, all windows were reinforced, her phone and sidearm were both within reach. "Good," Ryuko thought. "Now I can take control."

Smiling into Satsuki's mouth mischievously, Ryuko swung one shapely leg over Satsuki's lap, straddling her and continuing to assault the older woman's mouth with hers. Ryuko grinded ever so slightly, threading a hand desperately through Satsuki's long, silky black hair as their tongues lashed against one another. Ryuko then moved her hand down, down across the porcelain skin of Satsuki's neck and collarbone, down to one of her large and shapely breasts. She palmed it, squeezing forcefully as she took control of the situation. Ryuko felt Satsuki subtly gasp into her mouth, and couldn't help but sneer.

Ryuko had her.

Reaching even further down with both hands now, Ryuko tugged at the hem of Satsuki's borrowed shirt and pulled it upwards until her breasts were completely exposed. Ryuko thanked several different higher powers that she had neglected to put her bra back on as she dove headfirst between the two shapely mounds of porcelain flesh, working one with her hand softly as she nipped and sucked at an erect nipple on the other with her mouth. Satsuki now moaned openly, the sound of her husky voice filling the small apartment with sounds of pleasure.

It wasn't long before Ryuko's shirt was on the living room floor as well, Satsuki pawing at her soft breasts as she sat beside her on the couch, continuing to kiss her while she slipped one hand into Satsuki's tight workout shorts. Ryuko resolved to twirl circles there for a short

while with her middle finger, hearing Satsuki's moans increase ever slightly in both frequency and volume. With that, Ryuko powerfully snatched both of Satsuki's legs, pulling her lengthwise onto the couch so her head was laying on one of the arms, her sculpted calves now laying eagerly against Ryuko's shoulders.

Ryuko pulled Satsuki's shorts off with ease, Satsuki huffing in anticipation. Leaning downwards, Ryuko placed a hand on either one of Satsuki's thick thighs and buried her face in Satsuki's nether regions, much to Satsuki's approval. Satsuki grabbed a handful of Ryuko's messy head of hair, moaning even more frequently as Ryuko's tongue danced circles against her most sensitive of places. Satsuki used her free hand to palm her own breast, gasping ever more in pleasure as she did so.

Ryuko worked like this for a while, alternatively squeezing Satsuki's thighs with her hands and running a hand up and down her stomach in lazy patterns. It wasn't long before Satsuki couldn't handle herself.

"M-Matoi, I-y-you're going to make me-aah!" was all Satsuki was able to manage before Ryuko, sensing she was near the edge, expertly plunged two fingers into her and brought her to a full, shuddering, panting crescendo. Satsuki moaned with her smoky voice, louder than she had ever done in recent memory. She rode out the complete intensity of her orgasm, arching her back before collapsing back onto the couch, panting and sweating. She was utterly exhausted.

"Y-You're more experienced than I realized, Matoi..." Satsuki said weakly between pants, Ryuko meeting her eyes and smiling. Ryuko reached down the length of Satsuki's attractive body with her own, planting a last and passionate kiss on her moist lips.

"I learn from the best." was all she said with a smirk, as she put her shirt back on and left Satsuki to recover, bringing her phone back over to the window with her.

When Ryuko returned to the couch, Satsuki was where she had left her, still naked but now peacefully asleep. Ryuko gently placed a throw-blanket over her perfect form, before gingerly planting a small kiss on her forehead and returning to the kitchen with the empty bourbon glasses. She began to brew a pot of coffee, deciding to forgo sleep tonight. She

would need to ensure Satsuki's safety as well as wait for any new developments in their investigation.

It was only at 3 AM, after two full pots of coffee and at least 12 separate repeated news cycles, that Ryuko's onyx-black phone rang softly. She swiped it from the coffee table along with a fresh mug of coffee, sidling over to the window and answering.

"Matoi. We've had a development." Came Inumuta's voice from the other end.

"Go ahead." Ryuko said, readying herself for the first new info in hours.

"Sanageyama and Gamagoori had a breakthrough at the station; it seems they were able to get some useful information out of the guy Ms. Kiryuin neutralized. They were anti-corp radicals, alright: or at least they appeared to be. It seems that according to our perp, they were hired by the Takarada Conglomerate, and my own research backs this up. They seem to be making moves for a power grab."

Takarada. Ryuko had almost suspected it but to hear her suspicions confirmed like this was vindicating, though no less challenging. The Takarada Conglomerate controlled the half of Japan KT *didn't* control, mainly from the Kansai region southward. Their corporate headquarters were based in Osaka, and what Ryuko had heard about them made her skin crawl. To say they ruled over their property with an iron fist was putting it lightly.

"Alright, I'll inform the CEO. Take measures to secure our assets against further attack using this new information, and ready yourselves to receive a reaction plan. I'll ensure the CEO's safety the rest of the night, and we'll be there first thing in the morning. Understood?" Ryuko said with utmost confidence and authority learned from years of military practice.

"Understood, commander. Inumuta out."

Ryuko let her phone hand hang limp once again, turning to face where Satsuki had been asleep on the couch. Ryuko was surprised to see her bolt upright, staring into her eyes with that ice-blue hardened gaze once again.

"Takarada. I should have known. That slimy worm has had it out for me since day one." Satsuki said, her voice low and steady.

"What's our plan, ma'am?" Ryuko said simply, switching easily into her military-esque persona.

Satsuki closed her eyes and took a deep breath, standing and drawing herself up to her full height. She snapped her eyes back open, meeting Ryuko's gaze with a determination that shook Ryuko to her core. Fire was burning where ice had been only a moment before.

"He's just signed his own death warrant, so our plan is simple: we retaliate." Satsuki said.

Ryuko smiled.

RED

Chapter Notes

Some explicit violence, so viewer discretion is advised. Enjoy!

Several weeks later.

"Alright people, form up! Orders just came down from the top, we're mobilizing." Ryuko said as she strode purposefully into their command center.

Her four subordinates looked up from their activities, quickly moving towards where she had positioned herself near the holo-table in the briefing area.

"We're finally making the hit, commander?" Sanageyama asked eagerly. The weeks since the attempt on their CEO's life had been packed with research, intel gathering and preparation. To say it had put them all on edge was an understatement. This would be their first exercise as a full team. Ryuko's first test as their leader.

They wouldn't fail.

"Our planning has finally paid off, Sanageyama. We've been ordered to take out Takarada." Ryuko said, stone-faced as she crossed her arms. The looks of surprise on her team's face were worth the trouble.

"Take out? As in assassinate? I thought we were gonna be stealing some company secret or planting incriminating evidence. Not that I'm complaining or anything..." Nonon said curiously. Ryuko's features hardened even more.

"Our orders are to kill him. With Takarada dead, his empire will collapse and we'll step in to pick up the pieces. This'll be our move to control all of Japan." Ryuko said with only a bit of revelry in her voice. Taking out the bastard that ordered the hit on her girlfriend would feel ever so good.

"Just as we expected then, commander?" Inumuta asked quietly, pushing his glasses up on his nose.

"Just about, Inumuta. Here's the plan." Ryuko responded, waving a hand over the holo-table. The glassy surface shimmered for a moment, before the brightly-lit schematic of an imposing skyscraper appeared in 3D on the table. Several points were highlighted on the light-model as Ryuko began running down the plan.

"Inumuta, you'll be flying the tilt-jet and providing cyberwarfare support. You'll drop Sanageyama and Gamagoori *here*." Ryuko said, indicating a point about midway up the tower.

"That's a public-use heliport and is essentially the front of the building. You two will do some good old-fashioned shock and awe, drawing security away from key areas so Jakuzure and I can execute the second half of the plan. You'll defend that position until the mission is complete." Ryuko said, glancing at Sanageyama and Gamagoori. They both looked at each other, Sanageyama donning a steely grin before facing back to Ryuko.

"Yes, commander." Gamagoori rumbled.

"This'll be fun, alright. What kind of gear do we get to bring?" Sanageyama asked jovially.

"Only the best, of course." Came a smooth voice from the command center entrance. The entire group's heads whipped around towards the source of the voice to see who this new visitor was.

A shortish, thin man with long blonde hair drawn back into a ponytail stood in front of several assistants wheeling what looked like containers into the command center. He wore a long white lab coat, and a clear orange mask over his mouth that somehow didn't muffle his

speech at all. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand rested on the edges of his glasses frames, a sly smile painted on his pointy features.

"Your timing is impeccable as always, Iori." Inumuta cut in over the noise of the containers being rolled in, nodding.

Iori nodded back, striding confidently towards Ryuko and the rest of the team as he did so. Coming to a halt directly before Ryuko, the blonde-haired man displayed a coy smile, extending a hand.

"KT Quartermaster Shirou Iori reporting for duty, Commander Matoi. I apologize for my tardiness." Iori said smoothly, looking upwards into Ryuko's face confidently. Ryuko took his hand and shook firmly, a smirk developing on her face as she did so.

"Iori! Good to finally meet you, I was worried you'd never come out of that basement of yours." She joked. Iori snorted, gesturing towards the containers in the middle of the command center.

"Yes well, when you see what I have to offer you and your team I think you'll be singing a different tune."

Iori moved to one of the two large containers, pressing a button on the side and revealing two human-shaped sets of matte black armor. They consisted of a skintight black undersuit, with several different pieces and layers of armor plates attached to the suit itself, creating a device that was capable of defending the user while also retaining mobility and flexibility. Sanageyama and Gamagoori reacted in enthusiastic approval.

"Let me introduce you to the Kiryuin Technologies PDR, or Personal Defense Regalia. These are the two most advanced prototypes we have, and this mission will be their field test. Capable of doubling the user's strength, tripling their movement speed and stopping up to a .50 caliber round. These'll basically make people with your skillset unstoppable. Just keep in mind, they're still in the prototype phase so they might have certain...kinks to work out." Iori explained, gesturing to different points of interest as he did so.

"Matoi, you might want to explain the second phase of the mission before I introduce the equipment for you and Jakuzure." Iori suggested.

"Right." Ryuko said, returning to the holo-table and gesturing at the top of the skyscraper displayed there.

"Alright, this is where it gets tricky. Takarada's office is located at the top of the spire, so Inumuta will drop Nonon and I on the roof of the building and we'll descend to the target. This needs to be quick and quiet, which means no direct engagements, no alarms...stealth." Ryuko finished, glancing at Nonon. She twirled her black blade in her hand, sneering.

"That's my specialty, Matoi." she said curtly.

"Once we make it to the office, we'll take out Takarada, grab his neural chip, and exfil using whatever means we have available. Inumuta, you'll need to be on standby from the moment we drop in. It could be a really short window to get us outta there. Now, Iori. What do you have for us?" Ryuko asked, crossing her arms and looking back to the Quartermaster.

"Like I said commander, only the best." Iori responded, clicking a button on the second container, revealing something much different than what was in the first. They were a pair of what looked like simple, black bodysuits.

"May I introduce the Kiryuin Technologies Stealth Regalia, Mk. I. One size fits all, simply put it on and it will mold to your form perfectly. Reduces any and all movement noise by 90%, and they're stitched with a kevlar weave good for protecting against CQB and knife attacks, as well as capable of stopping a 9mm round easily. The ring around the neck is a fold-up cowl, equipped with infrared and nightvision, standard. And here's the best part." Iori typed a few commands on his tablet, and the suits completely disappeared from view instantly with a slight *whoosh,* eliciting an audible reaction from the team.

"Optical camouflage. Capable of use for sustained periods of up to two hours continuously, and completely invisible to the naked eye, as well as most electronic surveillance equipment. Once again, it'll make people with your skillset nearly impossible to stop." Iori tapped his tablet again, the suits reappearing as quickly as they had gone.

"Oh, this is gonna be fuckin' *awesome.*" Nonon said enthusiastically, almost shaking with excitement and examining her new equipment.

"Alright people, don't get cocky. This is gonna be a tough mission. Everyone suit up and get your kits in order, we leave in an hour. Understood?" Ryuko ordered forcefully.

"Yes, ma'am!" Her team of four hollered loudly in unison. Ryuko sneered, fully in control and completely confident in her and her team's abilities.

"Then let's go kill that bastard."

It was the calm before the storm. The only sound Ryuko could hear was a soft white noise, the muffled sound of the tilt-jet's engines inside the crew cabin. Around her Sanageyama, Gamagoori and Nonon made final preparations to their gear as they readied themselves for their trial by fire. Ryuko stood near where Inumuta was seated, forward of the crew cabin in the pilot's seat. She inspected her sidearm: her father's Colt M1911, clean as a whistle and fitted with a suppressor. Her hand tightened on the grip, the gun a constant reminder of the silent promise she had made to her father upon his death.

"20 minutes, commander." Inumuta muttered back at Ryuko from the pilot's chair, shaking her from her reverie.

Ryuko looked around at the rest of her team, remarking on the fact that the gear they had selected so suited their personality and style of combat. Sanageyama leaned back on his bench near the rear of the sizable crew compartment, his legs kicked up on a handrail and looking resolute but characteristically distant. His AA12 automatic assault shotgun lay across his lap. Gamagoori sat next to him, inspecting every round in the belt of ammunition being fed into the light machine gun he had selected, a Belgian-made M240. It was a huge gun, but Gamagoori made it look like a peashooter in his massive hands. Demolition charges and fragmentation grenades lined his belt.

Nonon sat opposite them, fire burning in her eyes. There was a clear bloodlust there, and Ryuko was at least somewhat glad she would have someone watching her back for this mission. Armed only with a jet black suppressed FN Five-Seven pistol that was holstered to her leg, Nonon twirled her black-bladed dagger as usual in between her gloved palms. Ryuko doubted that Nonon would even use the pistol unless she absolutely had to.

A beep from the microbead communicator in her ear once again drew away Ryuko's attention. Tapping it once and moving to the rear of the crew compartment away from the others, Ryuko heard a familiar voice flood her hearing.

"Ryuko. What's your status?" Satsuki asked plainly.

"Ma'am. We're all ready here. We won't fail. Is there anything you need?" Ryuko returned, just as devoid of emotion. Ryuko heard a slight snort at the other end of the line at her tone, and it loosened Ryuko's tension a bit.

"No, nothing specific. Just wanted to tell you to stay safe, *Captain*. Be sure to come back to me." Satsuki said, a hint of uncharacteristic tenderness in her voice. Ryuko smiled, loosening even more.

"I will, ma'am. Wish us luck." Ryuko returned jovially, trying to conceal her conversation as much as possible from the others.

"Good luck." Satsuki finished, and with that Inumuta once again called to Ryuko from the cockpit.

"Commander? We've arrived. Now maneuvering to make the first drop."

"Alright, Sanageyama. Gamagoori. You're up. You have your orders, now carry them out. We're counting on you." Ryuko said authoritatively, moving to the middle of the crew compartment.

"Yes, ma'am." Sanageyama and Gamagoori said in unison, racking the slides on their respective weapons. The armored cowls of their suits folded up and around their heads, clasping shut with a hiss and forming the full-face helmet portion of their Personal Defence Regalia. The tilt-jet's optical camouflage was still active, and as Inumuta swept them down low to hover over the landing ramp jutting out from the tower, the numerous guards positioned between them and the tower entrance were entirely oblivious of what was about to happen.

"Opening the hatch!" Inumuta called from the cockpit, the large crew door popping open with a hiss and sliding out of the way. The two armored men immediately opened fire, the tilt-jet's camouflage having been partially broken. The nearest four guards were decimated, blown away by an onslaught of machine gun rounds and shotgun blasts. The two jumped down and ran to cover, continuing to unload as they did so. Inumuta quickly closed the crew door, rendering the tilt-jet completely invisible again and swooping up and away towards the top of the tall tower that was the Takarada Conglomerate headquarters.

Around them Osaka stretched out for miles, factories dotting the landscape belching out black smoke and filling the sky with clouds of smog. The sight disgusted Ryuko, so used to the crystal clear air of northern Kanto and Tokyo itself, controlled by Kiryuin Technologies and situated so far beyond the brutish maladies of heavy industry. Ryuko silently hoped to herself that when KT took over this area, the situation for the land and people would improve. The sight made it all the more easy to do what they were about to do.

Ryuko turned from the viewport to face Nonon, who was now standing with her fists clenched. Her knife was holstered across her chest, the fire in her eyes burning even more hot. Ryuko set her jaw, preparing herself for their half of the mission.

"I know I don't need to ask this, but are you ready for this?" Ryuko said.

"Ready as I'll ever be. I'm just glad to see some fuckin' action again." Jakuzure spat back, sneering.

"Thirty seconds, commander. I'll be on standby once you drop." Inumuta hollered from the cockpit.

Ryuko met Nonon's burning eyes, nodding once resolutely before both of their cowls folded up and covered their faces completely, the eyes built into the cowl's faceplate burning a sinister red. The two faced the crew door, fists clenched. The door slid open once again, and with a click and a whirr Ryuko and Nonon instantly vanished from sight, as silent and deadly as anything could possibly be.

Kaneo Takarada was nervous. There had been attacks on his assets before, of course. Frankly, he was used to people coming after his money at this point. But there had never been a direct assault on his headquarters, and sure as hell never with just two men. Something was definitely not right, and as klaxons wailed from deeper inside the building Takarada cowered inside his cavernous office, the blast door entryway sealed off and his two elite guards standing watch. Nothing could possibly get him while he was in here.

Running a hand over the slicked-back helmet that was his hair, Takarada paced back and forth in front of the large set of windows overlooking the sooty, industrial landscape of Osaka. A loud hiss from behind him made him jump, and as he whirled around he realized with great alarm that the blast door sealing off his office from the rest of the building was opening.

"They're coming in! Protect me, you idiots!" Takarada shrieked, cowering behind his desk as his two guards scrambled to cover the opening door with their rifles. They moved closer, but began to cock their heads in confusion as the door swung completely open to reveal nothing but an empty hallway.

"Huh? Sir, there's nothi-" one of the guards began calling back to Takarada, before the rear of his head exploded outward, brain and flecks of bone spattering the floor behind him as he fell. Takarada started to scream as the other guard's throat burst forth in a shower of blood, his esophagus completely severed. It didn't take him long to die, choking until the gurgling noises that filled the room faded completely.

"Kaneo Takarada!" a booming female voice commanded, completely disembodied.

"W-What do you want? Who are you? *Where* are you?!" Takarada whimpered, frozen in place standing behind his desk.

A series of small clicks sounded though the large room, before two women dissolved out of thin air mere feet before Takarada, clad from head to toe in black. The shorter of them was holding a black-edged blade, dripping with the blood and viscera of the guard she'd mercilessly executed. The other, taller and slightly more muscular, moved forward pointing her pistol at Takarada's head. His hands shot into the air, and with several more mechanical sounds the menacing cowl covering the intruder's face folded back, revealing a messy head of black hair with a red streak and a burning expression of sheer contempt.

"It's game over, Takarada." the menacing woman said, her grip on her pistol tightening.

"W-What do you people want, huh? Money? Power?! I can give you *anything*! You don't need to kill me!" Takarada sniveled. The woman before him snorted.

"You should know better than to mess with those infinitely your superior. Now your company will be taken over, divvied up and re-purposed. The people of the Kansai region will be free from beneath your shoe. But...you won't be around to see it, of course." the woman with the red streak in her hair said terrifyingly.

"W-What are you-" Takarada began, before the woman cut him off.

"Satsuki Kiryuin sends her regards." the woman said, her sneer becoming wider as her finger pulled slightly on the trigger of her pistol.

Ryuko thought the look on Takarada's face right before he died was priceless.

The Great Escape

"Grab his neural chip, we have to get outta here damn quick."

Ryuko's voice echoed around Takarada's cavernous office, now completely devoid of life except for her and Nonon, clad in their black Stealth Regalia.

Nonon nodded, moving silently to kneel beside Takarada's corpse and place a small device at the back of his neck. It would take nigh-on a minute to forcibly extract the small neural chip embedded in Takarada's brain stem, but it would all be worth it: company secrets, hidden facilities, network back-doors. A virtual treasure trove of information, deviously useful in the inevitable hostile takeover of the Takarada Conglomerate.

"Inumuta." Ryuko muttered into her microbead.

"Yes, commander?" She heard the stoic voice on the other end of the line respond.

"Move into position back on the roof, we're about to-"

"FREEZE!" Ryuko was cut off by a desperate scream from the entrance to the office. Nonon and Ryuko whipped around, their sidearms coming to bear on at least a dozen Takarada Conglomerate security troopers, rifles trained on the two women. They were hopelessly outgunned and outnumbered.

"Put your hands in the air, drop the guns. Now." The leader of the security team ordered, motioning with his gun. Ryuko shot a look at Nonon before slowly raising her hands, grip still tight on her pistol.

"Inumuta. Change of plans. Below the main office window, hatch open. Right now." Ryuko muttered into her microbead, hoping Inumuta could hear her.

"Understood. Fifteen seconds." Came the calm reply from the other end of the line, the whine of jet engines just barely audible in the background.

"I said drop the guns! NOW!" The security officer shrieked, the team now slowly moving towards Ryuko and Nonon. Ryuko shot another look at her partner, trusting that she had heard her exchange with their pilot. With a flick of her wrist, Ryuko signaled to initiate their revised escape plan.

The cowl of Ryuko's suit folded up near-instantly as her and Nonon began sprinting towards the main window at the back of the office, enveloping her head once again in a protective layer and enhancing her eyesight and hearing. Gunfire erupted from behind them as both of them began to initiate the active camouflage function of the Stealth Regalia, firing their sidearms at the window at the same time.

Time moved in slow motion for everyone in the room as Ryuko and Nonon crashed through the window and out into the open air, the security team behind them sprinting towards where they had made their escape. Ryuko could see the face of the security commander as she twirled around in midair, shock and anger played out on his stern features. Half-disappeared and smirking inside her cowl, Ryuko moved a shimmering hand slowly in front of her face as it dissolved into nothingness, showing off and making the enemy all the more frustrated in their loss.

Thud.

Ryuko landed hard on her back through the open hatch of the tilt-jet and onto the compartment floor, the door sliding closed quickly and Inumuta maneuvering away from the building at a steep angle. Nonon reappeared standing over her, her cowl folding back and revealing a huge sneer on her youthful features. She offered Ryuko a hand, pulling the larger girl up to her feet as she re-materialized and deactivated her cowl, panting.

"You're one crazy bitch, you know that?" Nonon said, chuckling through her heavy breathing.

"I don't think I've ever done something *that* insane before. Nice piloting, Inumuta." Ryuko said as she began to step forward with her left foot, instead stumbling and reaching for a handrail when immense pain shot up her leg when she tried to put weight on it. Nonon's face screwed into a grimace as she stared down at Ryuko's leg, a clean bullet wound bleeding

profusely through her suit. One of the rounds fired by the security team as they were escaping, no doubt.

"Shit." Was all Ryuko could manage before she fell to one knee, grimacing in pain.

"Shit is right, ya damn idiot! How the hell did you manage to get shot?!" Nonon squeaked, scrambling to open the first aid kit. Removing a wide roll of heavy-duty gauze, she wrapped Ryuko's leg and began applying pressure to the gaping bullet wound she had received. Ryuko fought through the pain, choosing to ignore the verbal jabs Nonon was sending her way and instead contact the rest of her team still on the ground.

"Sanageyama, Gamagoori. What's your status?" she said into her microbead, straining. The sound of gunfire and explosions erupted from the other end.

"We're not going to last much longer, commander!" Gamagoori roared over the racket.

"They brought out the big guns, Matoi! We need to get the hell outta here, and fast!" Sanageyama added. Ryuko immediately sprung into action despite her wound, pulling up onto her good leg and using overhead handholds to hop her way towards the cockpit.

"Inumuta, bring us down to their position. Use the nose gun to cover them."

"But commander, that will fully break our cloak-"

"I don't give a damn, just do it. And quickly." Ryuko cut off Inumuta's protest. She was in no mood to argue.

They swung in a steep downward angle down towards the landing ramp jutting from the side of the huge skyscraper, now completely transformed into a war zone. Rubble and broken

glass were strewn about the entire area, Gamagoori and Sanageyama huddled behind a chunk of thick concrete that had broken off from the main building. At the entrance, several dozen heavy security troopers and other assault personnel were massing, exchanging fire with the two armored men.

Inumuta came in behind their position, spraying the enemy emplacements with heavy fire from the nose-mounted vulcan cannon and giving Gamagoori and Sanageyama ample covering fire to make their way to the tilt-jet. Popping the hatch and letting it slide back, Ryuko frantically motioned to the two men to make their retreat. Her eyes scanned the enemy positions closely for any sign of danger, and what she saw there puzzled her.

A small, thin girl, dressed in a distinctly non-military pink dress, with long blonde pigtails spilling out of her head like enormous fountains stood in the heart of the battle as if taking a leisurely stroll in the park. Her face was bright and cheerful despite the rounds whipping past her in both directions, and as she raised an RPG that was much too big for her, her face split into a wide, sickly smile.

"Inumuta, target that RPG now!" Ryuko screamed, pointing downrange at the girl.

The stream of rounds from the vulcan altered slightly, pounding the blonde-haired girl's position and detonating the rocket on the end of her launcher, shattering windows halfway up the tower and decimating the immediate area. Bodies, rubble and debris showered away from the explosion, thick smoke now covering their escape as Sanageyama and Gamagoori pounded aboard.

Ryuko breathed a sigh of relief, but she couldn't shake the unsettling feeling the strange girl had left her with. What the hell was she doing here, dressed like that and looking so damn cheerful? The whole thing left a bad taste in her mouth.

Inumuta began climbing up and away from the tower landing pad, clearing smoke from the area with the back-blast of the aircraft's engines and allowing Ryuko to see the devastation wrought by the massive explosion. Ryuko used her cowl's augmented vision to enhance her view of the area, zooming in on the center of the large crater left by the explosion. Her heart skipped a beat.

There, at the center of the crater, was the girl. Untouched. Unscathed. It felt like she was staring directly into Ryuko's eyes, smiling a wide smile with her hands clasped behind her back. Right before the hatch closed, Ryuko was able to see that the girl's left eye was covered by a stylized purple eyepatch, but it wasn't shaped like any eyepatch Ryuko had ever seen. In fact, it looked remarkably like a word written in Katakana.

The hatch sealed shut, and Ryuko collapsed onto the floor of the tilt-jet, shaken and bloodied. The concerned inquiries of her teammates as to her health were miles away as she played the image of the girl forward and backward in her head, trying to decipher which word her eyepatch spelled. After about 30 seconds, Ryuko had it. She hadn't initially realized it was actually two characters stylistically combined, like a visual portmanteau. Unfortunately, knowing the word only added to Ryuko's growing list of questions:

ヌイ.

Nui.

The Spy Who Loved Me

Chapter Notes

This chapter is, well...explicit, to say the least. Beware, and enjoy.

"Kiryuin Technologies today announced its total acquisition of the Takarada Conglomerate, the once-great Kansai industry giant whose inner workings have been plagued by losses and infighting since the mysterious death of its CEO three months ago. The acquisition makes KT Japan's biggest corporation and our country's premiere competitor on the world stage..."

Ryuko's attention faded from the holoscreen on the wall of Satsuki's office and back to the transparent tablet in her hands, scrolling through millions of different versions of the same story: Satsuki had succeeded with her plan of acquiring the Takarada Conglomerate, thus making Kiryuin Technologies the sole benefactor of Japan's entire geographic wealth and power. It seemed people in the Kansai region were welcoming the news with open arms: Takarada had a bad reputation for screwing people over, and Satsuki was beloved countrywide. People perceived her and KT as saviors. Prophets.

Revolutionaries.

Ryuko had been called to Satsuki's office about a half hour ago, but she was nowhere to be found making her uncharacteristically late. Ryuko had resolved to read through yet more analysis of today's news when the door swung open and through it strode Satsuki with a small sigh. She smiled apologetically as she made to place her bag on her large desk.

"Ryuko. I apologize for my tardiness, the news has been big and I've been...a bit swamped." She said softly, fatigue evident in her voice. Ryuko smiled widely back at her from the comfortable leather couch along one wall, trying to calm her a bit.

"Hey, it's fine. This is *huge* news, Satsuki. Congratulations." Ryuko smiled even wider, placing the tablet on the coffee table in front of her and meeting Satsuki's eyes.

"Thank you. Anyways, a celebration is in order, yes? I think I have just the thing." Satsuki said, kicking her shoes off next to her desk in a rare display of homeliness.

Ryuko supposed it didn't matter, it was midway through Friday morning and most people had enough sense not to bother the CEO who just acquired them half a country. From a small refrigerator set into the wall, Satsuki produced an expensive bottle of champagne and two flutes. Popping the cork with ease, she shuffled over to where Ryuko was on the couch and plopped down next to her, filling the glasses before handing one to Ryuko. They clinked them together with a smile.

"To us." Satsuki said simply, happiness shining through her fatigue. Ryuko smiled warmly.

"I feel like I've seen this routine somewhere before." Ryuko said, cocking an eyebrow. Satsuki chuckled.

"One should never tire of the classics, *Captain*." She said with a tired smile.

Ryuko took a large sip, while Satsuki downed the glass in one go. Ryuko stared at Satsuki, concerned. She had never seen the CEO this obviously fatigued before. She didn't have much time to ponder the problem however, because Satsuki set her empty flute on the coffee table and lay her head gently in Ryuko's lap. Ryuko smiled even wider, warmed by Satsuki's once again uncharacteristic affection. Ryuko stroked her long, soft black hair instinctively.

"How is your leg?" Satsuki asked, reaching out and brushing the plastic and composite apparatus Ryuko was wearing on her left leg, over her jeans.

"Dr. Mikisugi's still having me use the cybernetic splint for now. He says it'll help lessen the impact on my muscles as they're healing correctly, and helps with my physical rehab as well. I should have it off in a couple weeks, max." Ryuko answered earnestly, flexing the leg up and down, small whirring noises emanating from the device as it assisted in the movement.

"How are *you*, Satsuki? You seem pretty damn tired." Ryuko asked, much more concerned about her lover's health than her own. Satsuki snorted, curling her legs up towards Ryuko.

"I am, Ryuko. To be honest with you, I could really use a vacation, but unfortunately that would be unbecoming of the ever-present CEO." Satsuki said dimly, her eyes glazed with fatigue as she stared up at Ryuko.

"Why the hell would it be unbecoming? You just bought us half a damn country, for fuck's sake!" Ryuko implored, throwing one hand in the air in exasperation. She had huge affection for Satsuki but sometimes her stoic and honorable attitude perplexed Ryuko to no end.

"You have such a way with words, Ryuko." Satsuki said with another snort. "Although my family does own a vacation home with a hot spring outside Naruko..." she said wistfully.

"Then let's go, dammit! Naruko's, what? A couple hours' flight max? We'll use the tilt-jet and just expense it as a company retreat, it's *your* damn company anyways..." Ryuko trailed off, folding her arms and looking away. Satsuki chuckled and reached a hand to softly cup the side of Ryuko's face, pulling her down for a warm kiss.

"Very well, Ryuko. I shan't be ignoring the advice of my security chief." Satsuki joked after breaking away from their kiss, smiling.

"You're goddam right you wont." Ryuko said, pretend-angry.

Ryuko could see the lights of the city of Osaki in the distance as she swung the tilt-jet in a wide, lazy arc around the expansive property that was Satsuki's family vacation home. The property sat a couple miles outside the former town of Naruko, now part of Osaki proper, and was completely isolated save for the one road that ran to and from the villa. As the sun began lazily setting behind the various mountains and foothills so common in this area, Ryuko gently sat the tilt jet down in the yard in front of the home, powering down the engines and letting the foliage whipping in the jet wash return to peacefully swaying in the cold breeze.

A thin layer of fresh snow crunched under Ryuko's feet as she stepped down from the pilot's compartment, inhaling a fresh breath of the cold mountain air. It was like a cold splash of water to the face: cool, biting, and refreshing. Ryuko always enjoyed the cold, so she was happy to be in such a frosty and idyllic place for a few days.

"Satsuki, we're he-" Ryuko began before she noticed that Satsuki was still strapped into the copilot's chair, fast asleep. Ryuko smiled, stepping back up into the cockpit and leaning over the pilot's chair on all fours, bringing her face within inches of Satsuki's. Kissing Satsuki softly on the cheek in an attempt to wake her up, Ryuko gripped her arm and gently shook, whispering into her left ear.

"Hey. Satsuki. *Miss Kiryuin.* We're here, your highness." she said sarcastically.

Satsuki opened her eyes and met Ryuko's, frowning.

"Thank you for the reverence, you dolt." Satsuki returned sarcastically before unbuckling herself and stepping into the fresh snow. Ryuko followed, retrieving their bags from the crew compartment and activating the tilt-jet's passive camouflage, making it all but invisible from the air as well as from long distances. Following the direction Satsuki had traveled to the house, Ryuko removed her boots at the sliding door and set their bags in a loose pile in the foyer, unwrapping the itchy red scarf from her neck. Satsuki had already flipped the breakers, the lights in and around the house lazily coming to life as warm air began to waft around the home for the first time in months.

Ryuko peeled her holster belt off and placed her sidearm on the kitchen counter, smiling fondly as she watched Satsuki kneel before the fireplace and attempt to get a fire going. Ryuko padded across the room, kneeling beside Sastuki with a look of amusement on her face.

"Need some help?" Ryuko said, only a little bit of sarcasm present in her voice.

Satsuki met Ryuko's eyes for a split-second, before staring down at the floor sheepishly.

"Yes...I was never any good at this kind of thing." She said quietly.

Ryuko chuckled, placing a wrapped log in the fireplace and swiping the lighter from Satsuki's hands.

"Trick is, you gotta light it from both ends quickly. Otherwise it doesn't burn evenly." Ryuko said affectionately, lighting the log before kissing Satsuki once again on the cheek. Ryuko stood up quickly, taking a deep breath and stretching her arms above her head. Satsuki did the same, punching Ryuko's stomach jokingly before moving towards the kitchen.

"Would you like dinner? We have noodles, I'm sure I could make something simple." Satsuki inquired.

"Sure! It'd be such an honor to have the CEO of such a huge company cook for me, what a privileged life I lead!" Ryuko joked, calling into the kitchen before plopping down on the comfortable couch across from the fire.

They ate a simple spicy noodle dish for dinner, enjoying the warmth of the fire and of each other. Satsuki was a surprisingly good cook, and they shared even better conversation as they ate. They spoke about anything other than what had dominated their lives over the past months: history, politics, religion, music, art. It was surprising to both of them just how little they knew about each other, despite the fact that they had already been dating for months now. It was truly a bonding experience, and as the conversation moved from dinner to the bottle of Japanese vintage whiskey Ryuko had brought with her, so too did the women move from the floor to the couch, and closer to each other.

"I still can't believe you like jazz, Sats. You seem much more like a classical music kinda girl." Ryuko said, her head swimming slightly with drink.

"I was raised on classical music by my mother, and that was enough to make me hate it. Jazz always seemed so...freeing to me. I'm just glad I have someone to talk about Miles Davis with now." Satsuki responded, placing her empty glass on the side table. Warmed significantly by the alcohol, she unzipped her jacket, moving both arms behind her to remove the sleeves. Ryuko couldn't help but notice the ample swell of Satsuki's breasts against her shirt when she did so, and she bit her lip as her mood changed gears from affection to lust. This was beginning to become a habit for her.

"That's enough talk for now." Ryuko said, placing her empty glass on the table as well as she moved to straddle Satsuki. She buried her hands in Satsuki's soft, fragrant hair as they shared a passionate (albeit sloppy) kiss. They kissed again and again, one after another, more and more passionate until Ryuko slowly began grinding on Satsuki's lap, hungry for more.

Clothes came off, inhibitions were discarded. It wasn't long after that that the only sounds that filled the house were their cries of earnest pleasure.

"Let's get dinner in town. I know a place." she had said.

What she hadn't said was "Let's get dressed up and drive the old 240Z in the garage down to a lakeside restaurant while the sun sets and you stare at me because I'm just *so* goddamn beautiful."

Turns out, that was exactly what they were doing. Ryuko wore the nicest, most attractive outfit she had: a tan blazer over a black shirt and red tie, a pleated black skirt with leggings and tall leather boots. Ryuko thought she looked nice, and yet when Satsuki emerged from their room wearing her evening's best it felt as if she might as well have been wearing rags. A deep navy blue dinner dress, tight in all the places a lustful girl in her twenties would like. Heels just high enough to accentuate her shapely legs. Her pouting lips coated with a dark rouge, making Ryuko's heart skip a beat. Her silky hair tied up in an intricate bun, the sides of her hair flowing freely as if to frame her face in perfect black trimming.

Ryuko's jaw would've hit the floor if her military training didn't kick in, her entire body tensing from head to toe. She looked so good it was as if Ryuko was staring at a painting, but no. This was real, and now Ryuko was sitting across from her, the light of candles and the setting sun mixing across her porcelain visage. She couldn't take her eyes off Satsuki.

"...Ryuko? Ryuko, are you okay? You haven't said a word since we sat down." Satsuki inquired, looking concerned.

"Oh, uh...yeah, sorry. I'm just, uh. I can't stop staring, I'm sorry." Ryuko said, looking away and blushing. "Dammit, what the hell am I doing, I'm so damn awkward." She thought.

"It's fine, Ryuko." Satsuki said, taking Ryuko's hand gently from across the table.

"If it's any consolation, I haven't been able to take my eyes off you much tonight, either. You look so...cute." Satsuki said, chuckling slightly. "Although I will admit it's a bit strange seeing you out of your street clothes. Even though it's not as attractive as your uniform, I like it."

Ryuko met Satsuki's eyes whimsically, before breaking into a smile and laughing. "Augh, that fucking uniform. If you didn't like it so much I'd never wear it again."

The initial ice broken, they sat eating, drinking and joking with one another, watching the sun set fully behind the mountains as the last rays glinted off the water of the lake outside the window. Their food having been long finished, the two imbibed several more stiff drinks until eventually conversation turned from the mundane to the exploratory.

"So, Ryuko. You must tell me, what do you...like?" Satsuki said thoughtfully, resting her sharp chin in one hand as she swilled her martini in the other.

"What I like? What the hell are you talking about?" Ryuko said, cocking an eyebrow.

"You know what I mean. What you *like*. And don't say elevators, or couches. Something deep. Something you've always wanted to try." Satsuki returned, giving Ryuko the kind of smile that could melt and iceberg.

"Oh god...here? Right now?" Ryuko said, rolling her eyes. Satsuki nodded seductively, sipping her drink with a little too much panache.

"Alright...well. I've always liked...kind of...submission. Being tied up. Being out of control, something like that." Ryuko said, lowering her voice to a mumble. Satsuki's eyes widened,

and her smile grew. Ryuko had given her what she wanted.

"Submission, hm? I suppose it's only natural. Someone so hardened and commanding must need a change of pace every once in a while." Satsuki purred.

"Fuck, I don't know. It never used to be something I entertained seriously, but...ever since I met you it's been at the front of my mind. Like...you can be so cold and authoritative when you want to be, and it...well, it turns me the *fuck* on." Ryuko said, passionate fire burning in her eyes as she swilled her drink, locking eyes with Satsuki.

"Cold and authoritative? Yes, well...only when I need to be. I think I could entertain this little idea of yours, *Captain* Matoi." Satsuki practically drawled her rank, the syllables falling from her mouth like a spring rain. Ryuko shuddered. Satsuki could be so seductive it hurt, and the fact that they were in public was the only thing preventing Ryuko from jumping her bones right now.

"A word of warning, Sats. I can be kind of a bitch when I get submissive." Ryuko warned. Satsuki only smiled more.

"Hm. I'll remember that." She hummed as she finished the last of her drink.

"Ryuko. Get in the bed." Satsuki said cooly after breaking away from their kiss.

"Make me." was Ryuko's fiery response, excitement in her chest and drink clouding her mind. This was her earnest attempt at trying to initiate what they had discussed over dinner. Ryuko was eager to see if Satsuki would take the bait.

Faster than lightning, Satsuki slid a hand into the back of Ryuko's hair and wrenched backwards forcefully, making Ryuko's head snap back and her mouth loll open in surprise.

"Sooner or later, you're going to learn to do what I say, *Matoi*." Satsuki growled in Ryuko's ear, before biting down hard on her neck. Ryuko yelped before pushing Satsuki backwards off of her.

She felt Satsuki's smile against her palm as Ryuko slapped her across the face.

"Yer gonna have to carry me in there, you stuck-up bitch." Ryuko slurred, shifting her weight and putting her hands on her hips, seemingly victorious. Satsuki simply smiled wider, Ryuko unnerved by the pure ice and stone set in her cobalt-blue eyes.

Holy shit. That look. Ryuko thought, before an impact to her stomach caught her completely off guard.

Satsuki had whipped a fist out, hard enough to knock all the wind out of Ryuko's sails, and before she could recover she had picked Ryuko up and slung her over one shoulder, carrying her to the bedroom. Ryuko attempted to regain her breath while simultaneously stifling excited laughter. She was hoping Satsuki would take her bait but she wasn't expecting anything like this.

"I suppose I'll have to teach you to keep your hands to yourself, Matoi." Satsuki said cooly as she threw Ryuko down on the soft bed, standing over her with an air of righteous indignation.

"Strip." She commanded simply, and turned around to begin taking off her dinner dress. Ryuko simply smirked, crossing her arms and staying still, trying to get a rise out of Satsuki. She was fully into the brat mindset now, and she would be damned if she wasn't going to play the part. Satsuki turned slowly back to Ryuko and gave her a look that would turn any lesser person to stone, already halfway out of her dress.

"I gave you an order, Matoi. I said, *strip.*" She hissed, both mock-vitriol and seduction dripping from her voice in equal measure. Ryuko complied, removing her outfit until she was completely naked. She stared up at Satsuki, now fully out of her dress. She looked the part: black bra, black panties connected with garters to long, black stockings that accentuated her shapely legs. She had left her heels on, and was now staring down at Ryuko holding a belt and what appeared to be a bandana folded lengthwise several times.

"What the fuck else do you want?" Ryuko demanded, before she was pinned unwittingly under Satsuki's weight, her wrists in Satsuki's hands firmly.

"I want...you...to...shut...up." Satsuki spat as she worked. Before she knew it, Ryuko's wrists were tied above her to the headboard, and a bandana had been placed in her mouth and tied behind the back of her head, preventing her from speaking. Ryuko worked against the restraints and found them to be secure.

Oh my god. This is so hot. Ryuko thought as Satsuki loomed over her, admiring her handiwork.

"Hm. I suppose I'll be able to make you behave yet." She said seductively as Ryuko shuddered in anticipation.

Satsuki ran a solitary finger from Ryuko's chin all the way down between her breasts, over her navel and stopping just before her most intimate of places, teasing her. Ryuko couldn't help but let out a small whimper as Satsuki began poking and prodding her, testing her patience and teasing her mercilessly. She licked the nape of Ryuko's neck, Ryuko unable to hold back more sounds. Satsuki smiled devilishly, moving the workings of her mouth down to Ryuko's breasts, ghosting over every part except the one Ryuko most desired.

It was killing Ryuko to not be able to touch Satsuki, but she supposed this was all glorious punishment for her slap earlier. She was surprised Satsuki let her get away with that, but she guessed it was just another reason why the slightly older girl was so perfect. That, and the way she was now working Ryuko's nipples, sucking and biting them in a measure that was both pleasurable and painful.

Her other hand slowly slid down over Ryuko's navel to between her legs, Ryuko arching her back and straining against the restraints, moaning.

"If you don't settle down, you will get nothing. Do you understand me, Matoi?" Satsuki said cooly, her hand shifting back up slightly. Ryuko's eyes narrowed temporarily in anger, making to curse but her mouth was obscured by the gag. She slowly nodded her head, eyes pleading with Satsuki to continue. Ryuko reveled in her complete submission as Satsuki

continued, working circles between Ryuko's legs while her mouth caressed different parts of her upper body roughly.

Satsuki continued to tease Ryuko for what seemed like a half hour, working her up and back down again, all with a devilish smile as she watched Ryuko's ire rise more and more each time. Only when Ryuko was practically screaming at Satsuki through the gag did she plunge two fingers into Ryuko, taking her completely by surprise and turning Ryuko's angered screams into pleasured ones. Back and forth, in and out, Satsuki's hand worked between Ryuko's legs as her mouth alternated between biting the skin of her neck roughly and teasing Ryuko's breasts.

When Ryuko climaxed, it was intense, noisy and physical. Her screams filled the room, finally gaining some release after Satsuki had teased her for a merciless amount of time. Her back arched, her mouth watered and her toes curled. It was by far the best orgasm Ryuko had ever experienced, and after a while she had sunk back into her restraints, sweating and panting. Satsuki once again looked down at her disapprovingly, making Ryuko's pleasure all the more intense.

"Hmph." Satsuki intoned, crossing her arms so that her breasts were pushed together, making Ryuko ache. "Are you done already? How weak. Too bad, I was about to use my mouth..."

Ryuko's eyes bulged as she used every way she could think of to plead with Satsuki to continue. Her bratty put-on had been utterly destroyed. She was completely submitting to Satsuki's whims.

Satsuki simply smiled devilishly once more.

Frantic

Kiryuin Technologies proving grounds.

Undisclosed location, northern Hokkaido.

One month later.

Freezing sleet fell from the sky in light waves as Ryuko oversaw operations at the proving grounds. She and her team had come here to put several prototype defense technologies through their paces, primarily the Personal Defense Regalia Mk. II. For the past three hours, Jakuzure, Gamagoori and Sanageyama had been slogging through different routines in the sophisticated obstacle course below, testing out different functions of the powered armor, while Ryuko had joined Iori in gathering data and directing operations in the control tower perched above the grounds.

"Alright you three, take five and reset. We're going to begin live-fire exercises on the next run-through, so prepare for a sweep and clear op." Ryuko commanded through her communicator, receiving varied forms of acknowledgement from her three subordinates below.

"How we lookin' on performance, Iori?" Ryuko asked the slim, blonde-haired man hunched over several data consoles next to her. Adjusting the clear orange mask over his mouth, Iori spoke with only a little excitement present in his voice.

"The suits are living up to my expectations splendidly, commander. I'm seeing a 20% increase in user strength, as well as a refinement in movement speed and precision maneuvers." He said, pushing his glasses up his nose.

"I'll be excited to see how they hold up under live fire. The prototypes performed well enough against Takarada's forces, however the adversaries those three will be facing today are a little more...advanced." Iori muttered with a small smile, typing information into his console furiously. Ryuko nodded in agreement, folding her arms across her chest and returning her attention back to the grounds below.

On one end of the wide, complicated test course, Jakuzure, Gamagoori and Sanageyama were congregating, no doubt planning their strategy of attack. Sanageyama opened the suit's cowl and attempted to light a cigarette, before the driving sleet put out his lighter and he dropped the cigarette on the ground, angrily stomping it with his boot. Ryuko saw him tap Nonon on the shoulder, motioning at a simulated rock outcropping just off the course proper.It was situated higher than the course itself, and when she saw it Nonon nodded resolutely, some sort of understanding reached. Gamagoori checked over his light machine gun for what must have been the tenth time since the last test, making sure it was clean and perfectly functional. Ryuko snorted, marveling at how her team could be utterly efficient and yet so eccentric at times.

"Alright everyone, drill starts in ten seconds. Sweep and clear. You guys have stun rounds so try not to beat the ever-loving shit out of them if you can help it. Keep in mind they're using live rounds." Ryuko communicated to the team with a smirk.

She glanced over at the other end of course where the detachment of Kiryuin Technologies training forces were massing: around 25 regular shock troops armed with everything from assault rifles to shotguns and grenade launchers, and two heavy troopers with bulky unpowered armor and heavy machine guns. Ryuko had full confidence in her team, but she knew this would be a challenge even *with* the PDR Mk.II.

"Begin!" Ryuko barked into the address system, her team and the opposing troops springing into action. Nonon, holding a sniper rifle that was almost as long as she was, sprinted behind cover before jumping 15 feet straight up to the ledge of the rock outcrop, climbing up and immediately laying flat on her stomach, sighting down on her first target. Sanageyama and Gamagoori split off, each taking one side of the massive course. They would work their way to meet in the middle, crushing all resistance while Nonon provided overwatch and support. A classic, tried and true strategy.

After all was said and done, it took the three of her team members just under twenty minutes to neutralize all of the opposing team, with most sent twitching to the ground with stun rounds. The one exception came towards the end of the drill, when one of the heavy troopers got the drop on Sanageyama, who was busy reloading his combat shotgun. Gamagoori had

rounded the corner just in time to dislocate the trooper's shoulder from its socket with a immensely powerful shoulder charge, the bulky soldier pounding into the ground and yelping in pain.

It wasn't five seconds after Ryuko had sounded the ending buzzer and called the drill to a close that a sleek white tilt-jet emblazoned with the Kiryuin Technologies logo came screaming over the proving grounds, sweeping in a wide arc before slowing to set down on the helipad nearby. The jet wash blew rain and snow alike outwards from the machine as the hatch popped open, a raincoated figure emerging and opening an umbrella, under which stepped a tall woman in a long dark coat. Her long black hair whipped gracefully back and forth in the howling wind.

Ryuko smirked, throwing her black poncho over herself, flipping up the hood and stepping briskly down from the tower into the driving sleet. She made her way to the helipad where the tilt-jet was powering down, speaking loudly into her communicator over the sound of the inclement weather.

"That's it for right now, everyone. Hit the showers and await further orders." Ryuko commanded, turning her attention to the two figures approaching her from the landing pad.

"Your timing is impeccable as always, Ms. Kiryuin!" Ryuko hollered over the wind, flipping down her hood and smiling while wiping moisture from her face.

"I can hardly afford to be late, Matoi. They say time is money, after all." Satsuki returned, meeting Ryuko's smile with one of her own. The two took an almost perverse enjoyment in how formal they had to be to each other in public, and this time was no exception. Meeting Satsuki's frozen blue eyes even through the driving sleet sent Ryuko's heart fluttering.

"To what do I owe the pleasure? I assumed you would be remaining in Tokyo for the duration of this exercise." Ryuko questioned, genuinely curious as to what was so important that it brought the CEO herself all the way up to northern Hokkaido.

"In truth it's more because of me than anything else, commander." The raincoat-clad figure holding the umbrella said, before flipping his hood back to reveal a familiar face. Pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, Houka Inumuta nodded curtly at Ryuko in greeting as he always did.

"Inumuta! What the hell are *you* doing here?" Ryuko exclaimed in surprise. Inumuta had also stayed behind in Tokyo and was not expected at all on this trip.

"I assure you commander, it's nothing unimportant that brings both me *and* the CEO up here in person." he said, shaking his head.

"The girl you saw on the Takarada mission. The one with the eyepatch. We've found her." Satsuki said gravely.

Ryuko's throat tightened and her heart rate increased slightly as she remembered that terrifyingly jovial smile, staring right into her eyes...into her soul, even. The girl was nothing but trouble, and their mission to assassinate Takarada had been a demonstration of that. Ryuko tightened her fists and shared a steely look with Satsuki.

"Let's get this over with." Ryuko said through gritted teeth as they marched off to the nearest briefing room.

"After some hard work and a few of my clever tricks, I have managed to put together a profile on the girl you saw that day in Osaka." Inumuta said to the gathered crowd in the briefing room.

Sitting in a small semicircle of seats around a holoscreen set into one wall, Ryuko, Nonon, Sanageyama, Gamagoori, Iori and Satsuki all listened intently to what information Inumuta had to present. Ryuko's fists were clenched and her jaw was set: she had a bad feeling about this girl one way or another, and she was hoping that any information might serve to calm her a bit.

"Her name is Nui Harime. She is known for being bold, flashy and unflinching. Unsurprising considering she wears her first name over one eye like some sort of conceited Harajuku

fashionista." Inumuta continued with a snort, calling up a blurry but clearly recognizable picture of the girl on the screen.

"This was taken shortly after an attack on a fuel processing facility in mainland China two years ago. It was one of the only existing pictures I could find of her; surprising considering she gallivants around in that flashy getup." Inumuta said, quickly switching to another slide, this time of some sort of symbol: a pair of scissors, open and set in front of a menacing skull, quite similar to a skull and crossbones.

"She is the leader of a secretive anti-corporate radical group that simply calls themselves 'La vie est drôle'. They're known for being effective, highly radicalized, and incredibly brutal. Rarely is anyone left alive after one of their attacks, and I cannot possibly overstate the danger one faces when put in her crosshairs." Inumuta sighed, adjusting his glasses before looking directly at Ryuko. Ryuko's blood ran cold as she stared at the screen blankly.

"This brings me to information that may be, to say the least, unpleasant. In my search for intel regarding Nui Harime, I came across compelling evidence that La vie est drôle participated in an attack on a military parade in Vietnam some time ago." Inumuta said, Ryuko tensing and her fists clenching even more. She did not like where this was going.

"This attack resulted in the deaths of several visiting Japanese military personnel, including your father, Major General Isshin Matoi. I don't have any definitive proof, but I would say that based on the evidence gathered there is a significant chance Nui Harime was directly responsible for your father's murder, commander. I'm sorry." Inumuta said quietly, emotion uncharacteristically showing on his face as he looked away.

Around the room, the reactions of the team went from hardened looks to outright shock. Ryuko noticed none of them, however. Her mind had locked. Shut down. A red mist was beginning to descend in her vision and she knew she had to get out of the room and away from her team, away from Satsuki, before she let the seething rage building inside her out.

"Dismissed." was all Ryuko was able to mutter as she stood and made for the door quickly, forgetting her rain coat and sidearm in her blind state.

"Commander-"

"Matoi-"

Several voices called after her as she opened the door, including Satsuki's, clearly worried but trying to stifle what must have been a much deeper desire to comfort Ryuko. Ryuko turned, a hardened grimace on her face and a fiery, murderous rage burning in her eyes that no one on the team had yet seen.

"I said *dismissed.* " She hissed, several of her team members recoiling visually at the poison in her statement. The last thing Ryuko saw before slamming the door was a look of worry and dismay on Satsuki's face, but it didn't matter. She had to get out. *Out, out, out.* Away from everything before the anger and hurt inside her boiled over and the desire to destroy all she saw consumed her fully.

Into the dark and driving sleet she went, completely oblivious to the fact that she was uncovered, and as a result being pelted relentlessly by a biting cold mixture of rain and snow. She began slogging through the slush, leaving the proving grounds behind and breaking into a full sprint, the rage within her threatening to explode at any point. As she came upon the edge of a forest about a half mile from the outer wall of the proving grounds, Ryuko let out a scream that pierced above the noise of the storm and contained all the ire and malice injected into her since the day she learned of her father's death.

She began lashing out physically at anything near her, punching trees and rocks until her knuckles were raw and bloody. Mud kicked up from the haggard steps she took, coating her body with muck. Ryuko became more and more drained, choosing to ignore her tired muscles as the hurt inside her demanded more bloodshed. After what seemed like hours of lashing out in anger, Ryuko collapsed to her knees in the muck, bloody fists clenched in front of her.

"GGGRRREEEEEAAAAAAAGH!" Ryuko screamed, the rage within her now seeping out of every pore. Opening her eyes that were clenched tightly shut, Ryuko stared in front of her, trying to regain some energy. It was then that a flash of lightning ripped through the darkness, revealing a tall and raincoat-swathed figure towering over her in the short distance between them. Ryuko recognized the cobalt-blue eyes staring down at her through the darkness, and felt a pang of guilt.

"Ryuko." Satsuki said, stark and cold but also containing some measure of pleading.

"Get away from me." Ryuko said, her emotion controlling her words.

"You're going to hurt yourself-"

"I said GET THE FUCK AWAY!" Ryuko screamed, turning her back and sprinting away.

She tried once again to lash out at anything she could find, but a strong hand gripped her shoulder. Blinded and confused by pure rage, Ryuko barely comprehended whipping around and throwing a devastating punch at her attacker. The punch was caught in the other person's palm with a wet slap, Ryuko's burning eyes staring up into the cool eyes opposite her. Something in those eyes made her rage falter, and she had an anomalous moment of lucidity.

Ryuko could see the concern and hurt in Satsuki's eyes, her lover's hand now closed tightly around her bloody fist. Ryuko's stomach heaved as she came around out of her fit, realizing the gravity of what she had just done. She had attacked Satsuki, with a hatred and vitriol that should never be directed at someone so wonderful.

"O-Oh god, I'm sorry-" Ryuko began, before sinking to her knees weakly and receding into herself.

Satsuki followed her down, embracing Ryuko in a tight hug as they sat on their knees in the muck together. Ryuko breathed heavily as she felt a warm liquid running down her cheeks, mixing with the rainwater and perspiration already there. Her teeth chattered and her chest heaved, Ryuko feeling almost disconnected from her body at this point. Satsuki pulled a section of her raincoat over Ryuko, embracing her fully and allowing her to have some respite from the driving weather.

For the first time since she could remember, Ryuko cried.

She felt utterly broken, the only thing tying her to this world being the perfect woman whose arms were around her, trying to comfort her. She didn't deserve it. She had tried to hurt the

only person in this world that actually loved her. Regardless of the reasons, that was unforgivable.

"Ryuko." Satsuki muttered lovingly into her ear, imploring Ryuko to come back to her. Ryuko looked up into those blue eyes, finding a measure of comfort in them as she usually did.

"We will find her, and we will make her pay for what she has done. But doing this will not serve any purpose other than to injure yourself, and I cannot allow it. Come back with me." Satsuki implored.

Ryuko managed a nod, feeling utterly ashamed and completely drained. Satsuki wrapped Ryuko in her raincoat, kissing her on the top of the head affectionately. Satsuki moved one hand to cup Ryuko's chin gently, kissing her softly before pulling back and staring intently into her eyes. Satsuki spoke softly, so as to just barely hear her over the noise of the storm.

"I love you, Ryuko Matoi." She said before scooping Ryuko up into her arms and beginning the trek back to the proving grounds.

"I love you too..." Was all Ryuko could manage before passing out in Satsuki's arms, darkness filling her vision and her soul as she drifted away into nothingness.

The Lives of Others

Ryuko awoke with a start, pain immediately shooting from each fist up through her arms like a bolt of lightning. She groaned as she collapsed back into the bed, head pounding and eyes bleary. She felt like she had been hit by a freight train, and with her current physical and mental state, Ryuko was wishing she had been. She was clothed in a hospital gown under the sheets, and as her heart rate climbed slightly in confusion she noticed there was an IV drip running into one arm. Alarmed, Ryuko tried to get into an upright sitting position when she felt a calming touch to her right shoulder.

Turning, Ryuko saw the only thing that could slow her roll in such a tumultuous situation. Satsuki smiled wearily, rubbing Ryuko's shoulder with her thumb affectionately as she guided her back into a laying position on the bed, taking a seat beside her and clasping Ryuko's hand.

"I'm glad you're awake, Ryuko." Satsuki said softly, squeezing Ryuko's hand in hers.

"W-Where am I?" Ryuko slurred, still trying to come out of the haze of sleep.

"Toyko, back at KT headquarters in the infirmary. We didn't have the means to treat you fully at the proving grounds, so we moved you back here. You've been out for almost a day and a half." Satsuki responded quietly, her gaze straying off to a corner of the room.

Ryuko's body and mind flooded with anxiety and shame. She had freaked out so badly that she'd put herself out of action for a day and a half? Long enough for any number of things to compromise the security of the company and, most importantly, the CEO? What the hell was wrong with her?

"Listen, Satsuki, I..." Ryuko trailed off, looking for the right words to say as Satsuki stared into her eyes, concerned.

"Satsuki, what I did was unprofessional and-"

"Ryuko, you don't need to-"

"No. Satsuki, please. I need to say this." Ryuko cut off Satsuki's placating forcefully, not breaking eye contact.

"Very well." Satsuki sighed.

"What I did was not only unprofessional and childish, it put the security of you, the team, and the entire company at risk, without even mentioning my own personal well-being. It was stupid, irrational and unsafe. I know I don't need to tell you that I'm deeply sorry, but I want to anyways. From the bottom of my heart, I regret my actions. That being said, you would be completely within your rights to suspend me from duty or dismiss me as you see fit. In fact, based on my current emotional and physical state, I would recommend it." Ryuko stated her points all matter-of-factly, fighting with every inch of her being the instinct to curl up under the covers and try to regain some sense of comfort and dignity.

Satsuki's eyebrows lowered, her expression shifting to one of concern to one of frustration. She stood up from the bed and towered over Ryuko, putting her hands on her hips and shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Ryuko shrank.

"Respectfully, Ryuko, I have no intention of taking your suggestions into account or following them in any way. I will consider the fact that you even made them nothing more than a product of your weakened mental state, as they are no doubt the delusions of someone driven mad with fatigue. What you did was reckless, yes. But in no way will it be considered by me or anyone else to be crossing the line, given your circumstances. You have dedicated your entire adult life to fighting anti-corp radicals, and finding out that public enemy number one murdered your father certainly is not information to be taken lightly. Frankly, I'd be more worried if you *didn't* react the way you did. In short, you will not be suspended, you will not be dismissed; in fact I expect you to be on your feet and back to work as soon as you are able. Do I make myself clear, *Captain*?"

Ryuko stared up at Satsuki, mouth agape and fire burning in her once-cold heart. She was in utter awe of the woman towering before her, giving her a second chance where none was deserved. Ryuko couldn't help but love her even more in that moment, and as a result she felt thoughts falling out of her mouth that she had no intention of saying out loud.

"God you are so pretty when you're giving orders..." Ryuko drawled.

Satsuki raised an eyebrow and deflated a little, clearly taken aback by Ryuko's comment. This was in no way the response she had expected, but then again Satsuki supposed that when dealing with Ryuko in this way one could never expect a standard response. Their relationship was a constant adventure.

Before either of them could continue, the door to the room swept aside and through it strode a tall, muscular man with scraggly blue hair dressed in a lab coat. He smiled as he saw Ryuko's condition.

"Ryuko-kun! I'm glad to see you're awake. How are you feeling?" he asked as he took a look at the chart at the foot of her bed.

"Alright, Dr. Mikisugi. All things considered, at least." Ryuko said, scratching the back of her head.

"You gave us quite a scare there-" Dr. Mikisugi began, before Ryuko's assistant Mako burst through the door after him and threw her arms around Ryuko, enveloping her in a tight hug that squeezed all the air from Ryuko's lungs.

"Ryuko-chan! We were all so worried about you! How are you?! Are you hurt?!" Mako inquired frantically, Satsuki and Dr. Mikisugi sharing an amused look as Ryuko dealt with the situation at hand. She held Mako at arms length, trying to regain some of her breath.

"Mako, I'm fine. Really. Just a little...worn out, is all."

"I'm glad you're okay, Ryuko-chan. You still owe me for dinner, after all." Mako said with a wink. Ryuko snorted, feeling better by the minute.

"Yeah, I guess I do. Don't let me forget that." Ryuko said with a smile, patting Mako on the head affectionately.

"Dr. Mikisugi, how long until Ryuko is back to fighting strength?" Satsuki asked, getting down to business.

"Ehhh...I'd say based on Ryuko-kun's current level of exhaustion she could be back on her feet tomorrow morning, with proper nutrition and hydration of course. But that's all up to you, Ryuko-kun." Dr. Mikisugi explained, gesturing towards Ryuko. Satsuki glanced toward Ryuko as well, seemingly relieved to hear that her recovery time would be so short.

"Come to think of it, I *am* starving." Ryuko said, rubbing her stomach absentmindedly.

"I'll handle it, Ryuko-chan! You just focus on getting some rest." Mako said confidently, accessing her phone and patting Ryuko on the shoulder gently before leaving the room.

"That's two I owe you now, Mako!" Ryuko called after her.

"Get some food and liquids in you and you should feel right as rain, Ryuko-kun. Don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything else." Dr. Mikisugi said with a wry smile, leaving the room to Ryuko and Satsuki once more.

Satsuki folded her arms and glanced at Ryuko, a small smile on her features.

"I should brief the four on your condition and then get back to work. Feel free to call if you need anything, Ryuko." She said.

"I don't want to bother you." Ryuko said quietly.

"There's one thing you need to learn, *Captain*." Satsuki said forcefully, taking Ryuko's chin in her palm gently and tilting her face upwards. Satsuki was smiling warmly, and framed by the light of the ceiling lamps, Ryuko thought she looked absolutely beautiful. They kissed, and once again as they always did, all of Ryuko's problems seemed to collectively melt away. The

world outside of their embrace was unimportant compared to this moment. Satsuki broke away after a long pause, her steel blue eyes meeting Ryuko's blue-gray ones.

"When it comes to you, I'm never bothered."

As Satsuki left, Ryuko slumped back into bed and patiently waited for Mako to return with the food. Even though the hole drilled through her heart by her father's death had been made more ragged by recent revelations, Ryuko was at least able to take solace in the fact that there was a perfect, beautiful and strong woman out there that loved her.

She would fight for that.

It was twelve hours into the stakeout, and Ryuko was starting to get suspicious. Her and Nonon were getting on surprisingly well, despite the tiny pink-haired firebrand's abrasive personality and apparent outward contempt for her commander. This was obviously not par for the course.

They were in Hong Kong, laid up in a vacant apartment near the top of a hulking skyscraper in the Central district. Inumuta had managed to track the Nui girl here, apparently attending a meeting with top commanders from some of the subordinate cells of La vie est drôle in a skyscraper across the way from them. Gamagoori and Sanageyama were also positioned inside another skyscraper with a different angle on the meeting space, and Inumuta and Iori had set up a makeshift operations center in a similar position.

The window of time Inumuta had given them was over twenty-four hours long, so Nonon and Ryuko had been effectively stuck together inside a somewhat cramped apartment while they waited, Nonon manning a high-caliber sniper rifle with Ryuko spotting with an electronic monocular. Smoke wisped gently upwards from the smoldering end of Nonon's cigarette, hanging from her mouth lazily as she sighted down her scope for the hundredth time this hour, making adjustments. Ryuko had smoked a few too. She knew Satsuki would kill her if she ever found out.

"Coffee?" Ryuko said, getting up and stretching her arms above her head.

"Yeah. Thanks." Nonon replied, leaning back in her chair by the floor-to-ceiling windows, taking a long drag on her cigarette before tilting her head back and blowing out a billowing cloud of smoke.

Ryuko swiped their empty mugs from the small side table between them and moved back towards the spare kitchen, starting another pot of coffee.

"So...how long have you and the CEO been together?" Nonon asked matter-of-factly.

Ryuko fought with every fiber of her being not to visibly start in surprise, and instead slowly turned her head to look at Nonon with a disgusted expression on her face. Nonon stared back at her defiantly, taking another drag on her cigarette before expelling the smoke from her lungs past lips curled into a sneer.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ryuko muttered, trying to play off this new inquiry as if it were just a stupid question.

"Don't play dumb with me, Matoi. The others might be completely oblivious to it, but I'm a woman too. I can see the way you two look at each other, the way you get off on being cordial and official in front of others. Not to mention the fact that you two have come in to work at the same time on too many occasions for it to be a coincidence." Nonon listed, counting her points off on her fingers.

Ryuko's shoulders slumped, and she looked away towards a corner of the room.

"It is really that obvious?" Ryuko asked, defeated.

"Ha, no. Not really. I'm just perceptive." Nonon chuckled.

Ryuko finished brewing their coffee, pouring two fresh mugs before returning to her and Nonon's makeshift sniper nest by the windows. Handing Nonon her mug, Ryuko sat back down next to her and sighed, staring into the murky black liquid at her own shifting reflection.

"What's it like?" Nonon asked quietly.

"What's what like?" Ryuko responded, cocking an eyebrow and turning towards Nonon, sipping her coffee.

"Dating Satsuki." Nonon responded before taking a sip herself.

"It's...I don't know, it's equal measures fun and hard work. Obviously dating the CEO of such a well-known company means you have to be on your toes, especially when you're also head of security. Sometimes it can be hard to separate work and our love life, but Satsuki is very good at drawing a firm line when needed. When we do find time to be alone, it's...amazing. More amazing than anything I've ever experienced." Ryuko said thoughtfully.

Nonon looked away wistfully, cradling her coffee in her hands and taking another long drag on her cigarette.

"Hm. So about how I expected..." she said.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Ryuko asked sternly, her eyebrows furrowing.

Nonon turned her face towards Ryuko, her expression almost completely blank, like she was fighting her emotions back.

"Y'know I wasn't gonna tell you this, but now that I've confirmed it I think you have a right to know." Nonon said, finishing her cigarette before pushing it into the half-full ashtray in front of them. Ryuko's eyebrows raised.

"I used to have a thing for Satsuki, a long time ago. I worked for her on a couple jobs and every time she'd come into the room, she'd give us that look that just makes you shrink in your seat. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. What can I say? I was young and naive. Anyways, nothing ever came of it and it's a long-healed wound. Not her type, I suppose. I just figured you should know, considering you two are...a thing."

The two of them sat there in silence for a while, Ryuko trying to decide how to react to this new information. She did believe that Nonon was over her feelings for Satsuki, as Nonon was not one to mince words when it came to this sort of information. However, Ryuko had to admit to herself that this would be coloring her and Nonon's interactions from now on, and would have to fight her impulse to "defend" her girlfriend from such interlopers. In the end, Ryuko decided to try and be amicable, especially after how tolerable Nonon had been over the past twelve hours.

"Look...I'm not gonna pretend like this won't be on my mind for a bit, but in the end I'm glad you told me. You didn't have to, but you did and I appreciate that. So let's make a deal, right here, right now." Ryuko said, Nonon perking up slightly and glancing over at her in interest.

"I promise to not let Satsuki and I's relationship affect our work, as long as you do the same. Deal?" Ryuko offered, holding out her hand. Nonon considered the offer for a split-second, before holding hers out as well with a sneer.

"Deal." They shook, before each slumping back into their respective seats, unlit cigarettes in hand. Nonon lit Ryuko's before lighting her own, blowing out a fresh drag and sighing.

"So how's the sex?" Nonon asked nonchalantly, before laughing loudly at Ryuko's surprised coughs. Ryuko punched her in the arm, hard.

"No fucking way I'm telling you, you pervert. You're just gonna jack it later-"

"Commander, we've got movement!" Gamagoori cut in over their microbead communicators, halting Ryuko in her tracks. The two women shared a knowing look before quickly repositioning themselves in front of their equipment.

"Where at?" Ryuko asked.

"Fortieth floor, corner room nearest you. At least four contacts, Harime is among them."

Ryuko sighted down on their target, pointing and guiding Nonon once she had acquired their position. Ryuko's heart rate increased as she saw two women and one man wearing drab military-style fatigues standing in a semicircle, in front of which was their ultimate target: Nui Harime. Her back was to Ryuko, and she was bouncing from her heels to toes whimsically, one hand spinning a pink umbrella in a lazy circle.

She was clearly addressing the men, but what she was saying was a complete mystery.

"Commander, I've taken a look through your monocular and have confirmed the identities of the other three. They're all Japanese nationals: Takaharu Fukuroda, Omiko Hakodate, and Maiko Ogure. Leaders of the Shanghai, Hanoi and Seoul cells, respectively. These are big players, Commander. It would be useful if we could take them all out at once." Inumuta cut in over Ryuko's microbead.

"Alright, Sanageyama and Gamagoori, sight down on the three cell leaders, Nonon and I will handle Nui. Wait for my go ahead to fire, I want to see how this plays out a bit first." Ryuko ordered into their comms, hearing Nonon slide the bolt of her rifle into place and flip the safety off. They both placed protective earphones over their ears to shield from the concussive blast that would be produced from Nonon firing her huge rifle in such an enclosed space.

They all sat and watched the proceedings a building over silently, Nui and the commanders exchanging words which seemed to be getting more and more heated as time went on. Their body language and facial expressions slowly changed from deference to anger as time went on, when suddenly after about twenty minutes of back and forth Nui produced a pistol from her dress, the commanders recoiling in fear. Ryuko's heart skipped a beat as Nui fired three shots in quick succession, the three bodies of her *own* commanders falling one by one onto the ground in front of her. An audible series of gasps went through Ryuko's earpiece as the events unfolded.

"Looks like we won't have to worry about the commanders..." Nonon muttered beside Ryuko, her grip on the gun intensifying.

Ryuko continued to watch as Nui threw the gun away, her shoulders heaving as she spun around to face directly at Ryuko and Nonon's vantage point. She was laughing hysterically, bouncing to and fro on the balls of her feet and continuing to swing her umbrella. Ryuko's heart rate practically went through the roof as Nui suddenly ceased her laughing fit, a huge grin spreading across her maniacal features. Impossibly, terrifyingly, she stared directly into Ryuko's eyes, raising one hand in the shape of a gun, before mouthing "bang" and pulling the imaginary trigger.

Ryuko's blood turned to ice.

"Fire. FIRE!" Ryuko screamed, Nonon instantly pulling the trigger of the enormous rifle beside her, blowing a gaping hole in the glass in front of them and sending a powerful round downrange at the girl in the building across from them. A split-second later, the round penetrated the window of the room Nui was in, but she wasn't there anymore. For a moment Ryuko thought she had dodged, but she wasn't even in the room. She wasn't anywhere. She had disappeared. Ryuko's comms erupted into chaos.

"Whoa, whoa, what the hell happened-"

"Commander, I've got suspicious radio activity-"

"She just disappeared, what the-"

Before Ryuko could mop up what was left of the situation, the building across the way was rocked by a massive explosion. The room they had been focused on had exploded into a powerful fireball, taking a huge chunk of that building with it. Debris showered down on the buildings and streets below, the screams of pedestrians running for cover plain in the air.

Nonon quickly cleared the chamber of the spent round, cycling the bolt of her rifle back and forth so a new round could take the place of the one fired. It would be no use however, and as

Ryuko stood slowly from where she was sitting she realized that Nui had evaded them once again.

"Alright, everyone. Break down your gear and prepare to meet at the extraction point in twenty. I want to be out of Hong Kong airspace before any suspicion can land back on us." Ryuko muttered into her microbead, disappointment and seething anger plain in her voice.

Ryuko glanced over at Nonon, who was already breaking down their gear for the trip home. Nonon met her eyes for a split second before continuing.

"Listen, Matoi. We'll get that bitch sooner or later. She can't weasel her way out every time." Nonon said, as reassuring as she could muster.

"Yeah..." Ryuko sighed, preparing to return home empty-handed once again. She clenched her fists until her knuckles were white, unable to get the face of her father's killer out of her head. They would get her, alright.

Even if Ryuko had to tear Nui's arms off with her bare hands.

The Sum of All Fears

Ryuko stood proudly in the middle of Satsuki's office, her mind surprisingly clear despite recent events. Satsuki was seated at the desk, hands folded in front of her and listening attentively to Ryuko's briefing on current affairs in the security division.

"We've managed to snag new pieces of information here and there, but ever since the Hong Kong operation went sideways it's as if we're hunting a damn ghost. One thing's for sure, she definitely knows we're after her now." Ryuko explained, hands clasped behind her back and posture settled into a comfortable attention, feet shoulder width apart. She was in her usual attire: black and white leather jacket over a tee shirt, jeans and white high-top sneakers. The comfortable weight of her sidearm against her ribs in its shoulder-mounted holster reassured her as always.

"Hm. If she is as dangerous as you say she is, then making her our top priority seems like it was the right decision." Satsuki returned, standing properly and making her way over to the bank of floor-to-ceiling windows to look out on the world thoughtfully.

"If I may ask, how are you dealing with the revelation that she killed your father?" Satsuki asked carefully, turning her head slightly back towards Ryuko.

"Despite my initial outburst, it's motivating me. Nothing more. I wanted her dead from the moment I saw her, and knowing that is only solidifying that fact." Ryuko said matter-of-factly, moving to join Satsuki in front of the window. Satsuki turned to face her and met her eyes, smiling.

"I'm glad. As long as it's not compromising your mission or the safety of the team, there's nothing more I could want." Satsuki said, moving forward to meet Ryuko's lips briefly.

Ryuko was startled to find Satsuki's lips didn't feel like they usually felt. They weren't as warm or as soft as they usually were, and while it was probably nothing, Ryuko still resolved to hold Satsuki at arms length, appraising her like a doting mother.

"Hey, are you feeling well? You don't seem like yourself-"

"Commander, I've got an unidentified aircraft requesting landing permission on a closed channel. I can't find it on sensors and it's not being confirmed visually by any tower personnel, orders?" Inumuta's voice cut in before Ryuko could finish.

Ryuko placed two fingers to the microbead in her ear, her heart beginning to race.

"Deny it. How can it be that it's not showing up on *any* sensors? Can you trace position through comms?" Ryuko muttered.

"I can try, commander. Give me a second." Inumuta said before cutting out.

"What's going on, Ryuko?" Satsuki asked, stone-faced but clearly concerned.

"There's an unidentified aircraft requesting landing permission. Inumuta's trying to find it now, it's not showing up on sensors." Ryuko explained. They both stood there in tense silence for several seconds until Inumuta's voice came back into Ryuko's ear, as frantic and emotional as she had ever heard it before.

"Commander! It's level with the CEO's office, 200 meters out! Evacuate immediately-"

Ryuko watched helplessly as, in a split-second, a tilt-jet gunship materialized in mid-air before the main windows of Satsuki's office. Spinning around so that its flank was level with the windows, the side door of the gunship slid open and a man in drab fatigues lifted what was clearly a rocket launcher, pulling the trigger. The screaming round closed the gap in a split-second, with almost no time to react.

"Satsuki-" was all Ryuko managed to scream before her world exploded, thrown backwards into the opposite wall by the force of the blast and peppered with chunks of concrete and shards of broken glass. The impact made her head spin as Ryuko fought to stay conscious among the hideous sounds and searing heat, the force of the wall coming to meet her nearly knocking her out and making her ears ring. When Ryuko came to out of her stupor, she was slumped nearly fifteen feet from where she stood, against the back wall of the office. She was cut and bruised, but remarkably no worse for wear beyond trivial injuries.

The office, however, was a burned hellscape. Small fires burned here and there as the area where the rocket had struck was obliterated, a huge chunk of the building now nonexistent as a huge semicircular black scorch mark extended backwards from the point of impact. Ryuko woozily examined herself as best she could before examining her surroundings for any further signs of trouble, her heart catching in her throat when she realized Satsuki was no longer by her side.

"Satsuki...Satsuki! Satsuki!" Ryuko began calling, trying her best to get to her feet but instead only able to crawl on her hands and knees away from her position against the wall. After some glancing about Ryuko finally saw Satsuki's frame, slumped over on one side with her back still to Ryuko, much closer to the blast area.

"Satsuki!" Ryuko called out, her lungs screaming in pain with every breath as she fought on her hands and knees to get closer to the object of her affection and love. This would not be the end of them. Whatever happens, they would overcome this. Not here. Not now.

Ryuko made to scream and reach for Satsuki one more time, before noticing a peculiar whizzing sound above the chaos and turning her head towards the source. She turned just in time to meet the bottom of a bright pink boot with her face, flying downwards through the gaping hole in the building with frightening speed. The impact connected with a sickly *krack,* snapping her neck backwards and throwing her back into the wall again, completely disoriented.

Ryuko hung her head, spitting copious amounts of blood from her mouth as she tried to regain some of her composure.

Clack. Clack. Clack.

The sound was frighteningly familiar to Ryuko as it grew louder and louder in her head, bouncing around her half-lidded conscience and tormenting her endlessly.

Clack. Clack. Clack.

With all her might, Ryuko managed to pull her swimming head upwards towards the source of the sound. Pink boots...a frilly pink dress...abnormally large blonde pigtails held together with a massive pink bow...a hideously cheerful face...a purple eyepatch. It was her. Nui Harime. Ryuko's worst nightmare. Her father's killer.

She was standing over Satsuki. She had a pistol in one hand. It was pointed at Satsuki's head. She was laughing. The words she spoke chilled Ryuko to the bone as she watched helplessly.

"Oh, are you awake Ryuko-chan? Don't worry, you'll be joining her very soon." She purred, her voice high and grating. Her laugh couldn't conceal the unmistakable sound of her gun firing, bucking in her hand as a single spent cartridge was ejected and spun through the air in slow motion.

Ryuko watched the life instantly leave her beloved girlfriend's body. Tears filled her eyes, clouding her vision as a tortured scream escaped her raw throat. Summoning all her strength, Ryuko slumped to her feet, unsheathing her sidearm and hefting it upwards to point at Nui. This would be all she had left. To die here, fighting her true enemy and avenging her girlfriend's life, and she would drag Nui down with her at all costs.

"You...bitch..." Ryuko managed, summoning all her remaining strength to move her free hand up to the old pistol, steadying her aim.

"Aww, Ryuko-chan! Is that any way to talk to me? I just did you a favor. Now we can play aaaaall we want, just the two of us! Tehehehehehheeee!" Nui cackled as she threw her own gun away, opening her arms wide as if to welcome Ryuko into some sickly hug.

"Fuck...YOU!" Ryuko croaked, before throwing herself forward, screaming and unloading her entire magazine at Nui. Nui's pose never changed, her cackling still echoing above the din of the gunshots. As Ryuko neared, her eyes widened in horror at the realization that she had miscalculated. Her bullets were bouncing off about an inch in front of Nui's body, clattering uselessly to the floor. Some sort of invisible barrier surrounded her, and Ryuko realized too late that absolutely none of her rounds would reach her.

Ryuko skidded to a halt directly in front of Nui, her gun completely dry and useless. Gritting her teeth and steeling herself for oblivion, Ryuko threw all of her strength into a devastating

punch at Nui's smiling face. With inhuman speed, Nui dodged inside the punch and struck Ryuko's elbow, throwing her blow upwards and away uselessly.

"My turn." Nui whispered into Ryuko's ear as she came sickeningly close, driving her small fist into Ryuko's stomach with strength absolutely impossible for her small size. Ryuko once again was thrown back into the wall for a third time, completely beaten. Blood ran from Ryuko's lolling mouth freely, feeling as if her ribs were pulverized. Nui was on a completely different level from her. There was no way she could win. She would get her wish, and the only thing Ryuko hoped was that she would be able to see Satsuki one more time once she was gone from this world.

Raising her head to look once again at Nui, a part of Ryuko was startled to find that she was smiling as the tears ran freely down her cheeks. Her beloved was dead at the hands of the same killer that murdered her father, and all Ryuko could do was smile and gladly await the blissful nothingness that death could bring. Ryuko watched as Nui's right arm made an uncanny transformation, her hand flipping up and out of the way to reveal a shotgun barrel, built into the very fabric of what was clearly some sort of cybernetically augmented arm.

Nui's heels clacked as she slowly made her way towards Ryuko, clearly savoring the defeat of yet another enemy at her psychotic hands. Ryuko smiled defiantly, staring down the length of the barrel all the way into Nui's wretched face, contorted into a smile so sickly it would have made Ryuko heave if she hadn't already made her peace.

"You see, Ryuko-chan? You're so much prettier when you smile." Nui cooed at the edge of Ryuko's consciousness.

Ryuko closed her eyes, and waited for the end to come.

The Departed

Floating in black nothingness, she watches events unfold as if through a television screen, slowly receding away from her as she drifts further and further from this world.

Her body is still alive, but her soul is already dead. She is faintly aware of danger, somewhere in some distant place that she used to inhabit. She faintly recalls staring down the barrel of a gun before receding further into herself.

This is the end. Certainly not as climactic as she would have hoped, and much sooner, but at least she wouldn't have to inhabit a world without her.

Without Satsuki.

Watching her die was the first and last nail in her coffin. Her world had ended just as soon as it had began, and now she waited for death's sweet embrace like the arms of a mother she never had.

Suddenly, something tugged.

Tugged, tugged, back towards her old world, back towards the misery and pain and suffering. Something was still there. Something wasn't going as expected.

A strange gurgling, hacking sound began to echo down the long tunnel of darkness towards her. What was going on? Why wasn't she dead yet?

She resolved to understand this mystery that had been thrust upon her. Swimming back towards her old world, the scene unfolding there filled her vision once again and made her heart skip a beat. What was going on here?

Ryuko's head snapped upwards out of nothingness, instantly aware of her body still slumped in the same position against the back wall of Satsuki's office helplessly. The strange hacking, gurgling noise that she had heard earlier now filled her sense of hearing, and as she tilted her head even further upwards towards the source she realized more had transpired in her moment of defeat than she had realized.

Nui still stood above her, albeit in a far more wretched, writhing state than ever before. Her arms were curled upwards desperately toward her chest, stained a deep red due to some unkown cause. The same red liquid that stained her chest was also pouring out of her mouth, and only then did Ryuko realize as she came further out of her senseless stupor that it was blood, *Nui's* blood, and that the gurgling sound filling Ryuko's ears was Nui attempting to hack out painfully desperate laughs around the object puncturing outward from her chest.

It was a strange sight to behold. A shimmering, pointed object, fading in and out of existence, was covered in Nui's steaming blood and sticking violently out of a perfect hole in the center of her chest. Nui weakly attempted to claw at the object, only making matters worse as rivulets of blood traveled down from her grotesque mouth to mingle with the weeping wound in her chest.

As Ryuko watched in equal measures awe and disgust, Nui was lifted painfully from her feet until she was hanging seven feet in the air, the half-invisible blade pointing directly upwards like a deadly weathervane. Blood dripped down the length of the blade continuing out of Nui's back, partially revealing a set of powerful hands gripping some sort of hilt. Before more detail was exposed, Nui was thrown violently from the blade, landing in a crumpled heap against the far wall, wheezing and heaving as her broken insides churned.

"Hm. I suppose energy shields do not stop swords, Nui Harime." a disembodied voice said, filling the room with its resonance and illiciting more choked cackling from Nui as she spit blood and chunks of her insides into an expanding pool of ichor in front of her crumpled, useless body.

Ryuko froze. The voice was unmistakable, but was also equally impossible.

A series of clicks and whirrs issued from the center of the room, and slowly a tall, muscular female figure materialized wearing what was easily recognizable to Ryuko as a customized Stealth Regalia suit, holding a traditional katana in one hand. The katana was unlike anything Ryuko had seen before, the blade a polished onyx-black with a pristine white hilt and silver quillions that terminated in strange metal bars, probably meant to couple with the sword's scabbard.

Ryuko was so entranced with how the tall figure whipped the sword downward and to the side, splashing blood off the blade and onto the floor, that she almost didn't notice the cowl of the stealth suit fold back and reveal the user's identity. Long, flowing black hair unfolded and began waving softly in the wind whipping through the gaping hole in the building. Perfect, porcelain white skin belied the strength of the woman's jaw and her prodigious, stern eyebrows. It wasn't until Ryuko met the figure's eyes that her heart nearly exploded.

Cobalt-blue, like arctic ice or the mysterious ocean depths. Cold, appraising, filled with hardened determination and unlimited resolve in equal measure. And yet despite all these descriptors of cold, hardened eyes, just a glimpse of their cool depths had filled Ryuko with a measure of warmth she had never experienced before. There was no mistaking who her savior was.

It was Satsuki Kiryuin.

As Satsuki smiled the same small smile she had used so many times before, reaching one hand down towards Ryuko as if welcoming her back into this world, Ryuko could care less about the how or the why. She simply took the hand of her girlfriend whom Ryuko had thought was dead just minutes ago, stood with no small measure of effort, and languished in Satsuki's arms.

"H-how?" was all Ryuko was able to manage between the pain in her abdomen and the warm tears spilling down her face.

"Hard light holograms can be quite convincing." Satsuki answered simply, pulling Ryuko even closer and kissing her on the top of her head. Ryuko watched as Satsuki pulled a small control from one of her belt pouches, clicking a button in the center of the remote. "Satsuki"'s body, lying in the same place near the center of the blast radius, disappeared instantly. Satsuki looked back down into Ryuko's eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Ryuko. For the deception, for the subterfuge...for everything. This was the best way we could think of to lure her in." Satsuki said, her features hardened despite the clear shame in her voice.

"I had to not know for the plan to work..." Ryuko trailed off, the entire picture starting to come together for her. They had *let* Nui get this far, but kept Ryuko completely out of the loop. She was the bait. A known quantity to the enemy. It was cold and calculating, even for Satsuki. And yet, it had worked. Nui was defeated, and Satsuki was still alive. Despite the massive risks involved with such a plan, Ryuko couldn't help but marvel at Satsuki's forethought. Looking back up at Satsuki, Ryuko cupped her chin, bringing her face within inches of Ryuko's own.

"Y'know, it was pretty cold-hearted, even for you, to make me watch you die. But at the end of the day, we're both still alive and the bitch that killed my father is dead. So I guess we're even." Ryuko spat, before pulling Satsuki into a rough but passionate kiss. Ryuko pulled away after a few seconds, continuing to cup Satsuki's chin forcefully.

"But you are so paying for this later." Ryuko said with a sneer.

"I look forward to it." Satsuki smiled, before a weak, wheezing laugh echoed throughout the room and drew their attention back to present matters.

"I'm not...dead...yet..." Nui managed, skin white as a sheet as the life slowly left her body. Blood was still spilling openly from both her mouth and the gaping wound in her chest, her broken body wallowing in an ever-growing pool of blood.

Ryuko broke her embrace with Satsuki to retrieve her father's pistol, calmly checking that everyhing was in order before loading a fresh magazine from her holster assembly into the gun, racking the slide to load a round into the chamber. She towered over Nui, slapping the cold metal of the gun into one palm repeatedly, pondering her next action.

Ryuko reached down, burying her left hand in the hair on the top of Nui's head, singlehandedly wrenching the girl to her feet painfully before slamming her headfirst

backwards into the wall behind her. Ryuko foundthat the barrel of her father's gun fit nicely inside Nui's mouth; the contorted, bloody smile never leaving her face the entire time.

"You know...it's gotta be kind of poetic, being killed by my dad's gun." Ryuko said, her features as hard as nails as she set her jaw menacingly.

Nui managed a few more hacking laughs, her ruined lungs racking up and down, struggling to manage the constricted airflow.

"I would ask if you have any last words, but...well, it seems like it's kinda hard for you to talk right now." Ryuko spat, Nui's laughs growing louder and more violent, her chest heaving causing more blood and ichor to spill from the wound.

"Good riddance." was the last thing Ryuko said before pulling the trigger. Nui died laughing, fat tears of hilarity spilling from her good eye and down her cheek to mix with the blood on the bottom half of her face, even after Ryuko had dropped her lifeless corpse unceremoniously at her feet, fist clenched and jaw set.

Ryuko stepped back, Satsuki and her both watching in curiosity as a small metal ball, about the size of a baseball, escaped the grip of Nui's hand and rolled gently to a stop in front of them. A soft humming sound emanated from the device, and before any action could be taken the device's function was revealed.

A life-size hologram of a tall woman, swathed in a long, flowing white dress and white furs, sprung from the device to appraise both of the women standing in front of it. Ryuko noticed with some curiosity that the woman's hair was spectacular, flowing outward from both sides of her head, glowing brilliantly with a plethora of colors not dissimilar to a rainbow. Ryuko gleaned with some suspicion that her features were remarkably similar to Satsuki's: a strong jaw, light white skin and hard-set features, although this woman wore a wide, smug smile uncharacteristic of the younger woman in the room.

"Mother." Satsuki said, her whole body tensing and stepping forward to appraise the hologram.

"Satsuki, my dear daughter. Whatever will I do with you? You seem to have broken my little pet. What a shame." the woman said, her voice low and velvety smooth, filling Ryuko with a sense of dread. So this was Satsuki's mother.

"Your 'pet' met the fate it deserved, mother. As will all your pawns that stand in the way of my ambition. How unsurprising that you were involved in her pathetic attempts to thwart me." Satsuki responded sternly, motioning towards Nui's corpse. The hologram chuckled, filling the room with a sinister energy that Ryuko couldn't shake. It made her feel sick.

"Yes, it seems I've underestimated you, Satsuki my dear. Rest assured I won't make the same mistake twice." Satsuki's mother purred.

"You will eventually meet the same fate, mother. The sooner you accept that the more painless your death will be at my hands." Satsuki shot back, stepping ever closer to the hologram until they were almost face to face. The other woman simply smiled wider.

"Satsuki, is that any way to speak to your own mother? Very well...if it's war you want, it's war you'll get."

With that, the hologram winked out, leaving Ryuko and Satsuki alone again in the destroyed office.

Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Ryuko thought.

The Sweet Hereafter

Chapter Notes

> I want to give a quick shout-out to my friend Liz who has been a big help with fleshing out some really great ideas for this series. She is my muse and she is a wonderful person, so thanks Liz!
>
> Enjoy everybody!

It was the fifth night in a row that it had happened.

It always started the same way: Nui stood over her body, firing the gun into Satsuki's head as the contorted smile filled Ryuko's field of vision, the hysterically grotesque laugh echoing for what seemed like forever throughout the recesses of her consciousness. Ryuko's mind, body and spirit all gave up, resigning herself to defeat and embracing the sweet nothingness that only death could bring.

It always ended the same way, as well: Ryuko awoke suddenly and painfully, her head throbbing and a scream freshly spilling from between her lips. She was covered in sweat and trembling all over, filled from head to toe with an immeasurable sense of dread and anger. Bile rose in her tortured throat, and with that Ryuko stumbled quickly to the bathroom to empty what little food she had managed to choke down the previous meal.

These nightmares were killing her.

Hanging over the toilet bowl, trying to sloppily slurp down a glass of water from the sink, Ryuko fought the urge to spew forth again as she recalled once more the sight of her girlfriend's would-be assassin, dead and splayed out across an operation gurney, a hideous grin still painted across what was left of her face. Ryuko and Satsuki had watched as Inumuta and Iori worked to examine and dissect every piece of what they now understood to be a cyborg, cutting into Nui's flesh and extracting every last piece of technology that they could use and examine to further their goals.

Ryuko had fought the urge to smash the glass of the observation theater and rip the disgusting body on the table limb from limb the entire time, instead resolving to clamp her hand in Satsuki's for comfort, a small reminder that what Ryuko had seen that day had not been real; that in fact it was Nui who was now dead and not Satsuki.

Fat load of good that's done me if I have to see her die every time I go to sleep, Ryuko thought wearily.

She glanced at the clock on her bedside table, noting that it was already almost thirty minutes past 5AM. Regretting her decision to not stay with Satsuki last night, Ryuko stood shakily and made her way to her apartment balcony, grabbing a pack of cigarettes and the closest bottle of bourbon on the way there. Letting the cool early morning breeze refresh her tired spirit, Ryuko lit her cigarette gingerly, blowing her first drag forcefully into the wind and watching it dissipate hypnotically. She uncorked the bourbon, taking a healthy swig before pondering the day ahead of her.

It was a Friday, but as Ryuko checked her calendar for the day's itinerary her heart sunk: it was Culture Day, a nationally celebrated holiday. As a result, Kiryuin Technologies headquarters would be closed and they would all have the day off (to promote "culture, the arts, and academic endeavour"), meaning Ryuko would not be able to distract herself from these recurring thoughts in the mindless drone of regular security work.

She sighed out another drag of smoke, watching it flow and melt away into the morning air as she pondered her situation further. There was one other thing ever-present in Ryuko's life that could distract her from all of her problems without fail, more so than any vice or indulgence of the substantive variety. Just the smell of her long, flowing hair or a brush against her milky white skin could send Ryuko to a far-away place; a place where none of this mattered, a place where perhaps none of the issues associated with this insane world of theirs existed and there could just be the two of them.

It was complete folly to think in such a way, of course. Ryuko was at her core a soldier, and soldiers of her calibre were always trying to escape one checkered past after another. She had resigned herself to it a long time ago. However, it had taken Satsuki to make her realize that just because the past hardens you doesn't necessarily mean there can't be someone to which you can be completely and utterly loyal, every intimate encounter an escape from this world and onto the next. Ryuko supposed that this is what real love felt like, despite the mushy connotation of the word.

It was because of this that Ryuko felt an almost immediate pang of hunger for Satsuki's presence, fighting the notion that she might be bothering her by reminding herself that Satsuki would not have gone this far with her had she not reciprocated the feelings Ryuko had for her in full. Ryuko could almost smell the sweet fragrance of Satsuki's hair as she put out her cigarette in the ashtray, pressing Satsuki's name in her phone and waiting for the sultry, smooth sound of her voice on the other line.

"Ryuko, you're up early." Satsuki seemed to purr when she answered.

Ryuko simply managed a weak smile as she let the sound of her beloved's voice wash over her, a blissful temporary escape from all worry and reason.

All things considered, the day had gone well enough for Ryuko. She had spent most of the day with Satsuki, and Ryuko had to admit that her presence had a measurable effect on reigning in the effects of the trauma caused by recent events.

Ryuko had tagged along with Satsuki to an art gallery opening, in keeping with the Culture Day celebrations and a clear attempt to make the Kiryuin Technologies figurehead appear as much a patron of the arts as she was anything else. Ryuko mostly balked at high art, often preferring the sun-blasted street adornments found in more colorful parts of town to anything painted on a canvas.

But when Satsuki stood next to her, a little too close for such a public space, and engaged her on the works before them, Ryuko was sure to respond earnestly. Those around listened attentively: venerable artists, dealers and collectors alike were mistaken if they should ignore the opinions of Satsuki Kiryuin and her cohorts.

"What are your opinions on this piece, Matoi?" Satsuki asked, quirking an eyebrow and flashing a look of mischief across her face that only Ryuko would recognize.

"Hm. A bit gauche in my opinion, however the use of color is quite impressive. I'd say it's quite akin to Warhol's later works, even if it isn't as effortless." Ryuko responded, plucking as

much feigned art knowledge and flowery language from her mind as possible and doing her best impression of Satsuki's voice. She laughed internally as Satsuki's eyebrow climbed higher, the looks from those around them a mixture of surprise and condescention.

"You surprise me more and more every day, Ryuko." Satsuki had said upon their exit, placing a hand in the small of Ryuko's back and rubbing circles with her thumb.

"What, that? Oh, that was mostly bullshit." she responded, both of them sharing a hearty laugh before they shared a passionate kiss, stolen away in the depths of the building's parking garage as they made their way to their car.

The day had ended uneventfully, with Ryuko falling into Satsuki's bed, exhausted. Not much thought was paid to the nightmares that had plagued her for the past couple days, and as soon as Ryuko felt Satsuki's warm, bare skin pressed against her back, her arms enveloping Ryuko's midsection, Ryuko was fast asleep before she knew it.

She was back there. Ryuko was filled with a crushing sense of dread and horror as Nui aimed the gun one again at Satsuki's head, the same horrible laugh that had spilled from her throat echoing once more through Ryuko's consciousness. Ryuko readied herself for the inevitable, that she would once again watch her girlfriend die, and this time there would be no Satsuki to save her. No miracles to happen as Nui would next take her life and the blessed embrace of death would envelop her until she awoke screaming and panting.

Nui's finger tightened on the trigger, Ryuko's eyes glued open, forced to watch. The laugh grew louder, louder and louder until surprisingly, it stopped arbuptly. Ryuko watched in awe as a look of horror slowly dawned on Nui's face, the entire room bathed in a bright yellow-white glow as a heat blossomed in Ryuko's chest and began spreading to the rest of her body.

Nui screamed angrily as she disintigrated, the gun clattering uselessly to the floor. The light was shining powerfully above Ryuko, cleansing her entire world with its light and forcing the rest of this horrid place to fall away beneath her. As the destroyed office that had been her personal hell these past few days completely melted away, Ryuko felt an immense sense of calm and passion overtake her as she floated in white nothingness. The light from above bathed her in its warm glow as she turned her head upwards to take in its beauty.

A figure hung there, a silhouette framed beatifically by its calming rays. An outstretched hand grew nearer and nearer to Ryuko, the figure's silky black hair blowing in an intangible breeze. Earnestly, Ryuko reached out to take that outstretched hand, Satsuki's voice filling her mind as Ryuko became acutely aware of waves of pleasure beginning to roll throughout her mind and spirit.

"I'm here, Ryuko. I'm here."

And suddenly, she was.

Ryuko lay in Satsuki's soft bed, panting breaths escaping her mouth as waves of pulsating pleasure flowed up and down her body. She was instantly aware of a wave of sensations: Satsuki's breathy affirmations in her ear, one arm under the back of her neck as her other hand worked tenderly between Ryuko's thighs. A choked moan escaped Ryuko's lips as she manouvered them against Satsuki's, fighting the urge to sob as she let Satsuki melt her stress and trauma away like wax against a flame.

"Satsuki, I-" Ryuko began, before another kiss silenced her earnestly. Satsuki moved her mouth to Ryuko's ear slowly, nipping softly at an earbud before whispering with a tenderness that was unlike her.

"You were crying out in your sleep. My name, mutterings of death and fear. Let me show you just how alive and well I am...perhaps you might cry out my name in a different manner."

Ryuko simply bit her lower lip as she met Satsuki's eyes, nodding desperately and letting out a breathy moan as Satsuki returned the ministrations of her fingers to the warmth in Ryuko's lower half. The twirling circles of her fingers were matched by the twirling circles of her tongue on Ryuko's nipple, Ryuko burying her hand in Satsuki's silky hair, smelling the sweet fragrance of her shampoo as more crashing waves of pleasure rolled through her body.

Satsuki moved her mouth up the collarbone to the soft, vulnerable skin of Ryuko's neck, biting and licking as she felt the vibration of Ryuko's moans against her mouth. Her fingers changed course as well, plunging themselves into Ryuko's depths with equal measures purpose and tenderness. Ryuko let a choked gasp escape from her lungs before her moans

grew higher and faster along with the position of Satsuki's mouth along her slender neck. Following the line of her jaw, Satsuki moved to whisper sweet nothings into Ryuko's ear as her climax grew ever closer.

"S-Satsuki, I-I'm-!" Ryuko gasped, before Satsuki's dulcet voice filled her ear.

"It's okay, Ryuko. Please...come for me." Satsuki purred, her voice colored with desire and even a small amount of desperation. She had never heard Satsuki talk like this before, and it was the absolute last straw needed to send Ryuko completely and helplessly tumbling over the edge.

Warm tears filled Ryuko's eyes as her entire body shuddered, a mixture of gasps and shouts escaping her mouth as Satsuki held her. The tears spilled down her cheeks; tears of release, tears of joy. They were a kind of tears Ryuko had not yet spilled in her life, but she was glad to be spilling them now as she felt all stress and trauma escaping her body, forced out by the crashing waves of pleasure against the rocky shore that was her battered mind and spirit.

When it was all said and done, Ryuko had collapsed into Satsuki's arms, the older woman drying the cheeks of the younger with her thumbs before kissing her lovingly on the forehead. Ryuko had looked up at her then, enveloped in each other's arms, and known with such frightening clarity that this was the person she would want to spend the rest of her life with.

"I love you, Sats." Ryuko had croaked, her voice shot from crying and hollering.

"I love you too." Satsuki responded, unable to stop smiling from the use of Ryuko's pet name for her, a finger twirling absentmindedly with the red streak in her hair.

Ryuko nuzzled her face into the nape of Satsuki's neck, wrapping her arms around her and feeling utterly at peace. She felt the soft touch of Satsuki's chin against the top of her head as they enveloped each other, the powerful warmth and comfort between them putting them both to sleep almost instantly.

From that night on, Ryuko was delighted to find her nightmares had ceased permanently.

Bitter wind whipped around them both as they weaved in and out of traffic, the motorcycle's engine whining as they headed west out of Tokyo proper on the Chuo expressway. Ryuko hadn't ridden a motorcycle since her phase as a rebellious teenager, and while it had been some time since then she found that it was no harder than it had ever been, despite the beautiful woman clinging to her back, arms wrapped tightly around her waist. *That* was something she had never had to deal with before, but it certainly didn't detract from the situation.

After an hour of riding like the cold wind that blew around them, Ryuko had pulled her and Satsuki off at a secluded overlook, the Japanese countryside spilling down and away beneath them as they walked hand in hand down a shady path towards an even more secluded area of the wilderness. Satsuki was looking particularly beautiful today, and Ryuko had to admit that when she had pulled her helmet off, letting the black furls of her hair spill down across her shoulders, she had to avert her gaze lest the hunger for her significant other overwhelm her.

Ryuko continued to sneak quick looks at her, taking in the sharpness of her features as they were bathed pleasingly in the clear winter sun. A prodigious eyebrow shot up when Satsuki finally caught her, Ryuko choosing to meet her eyes defiantly.

"My, Ryuko. If I didn't know any better I'd say you were positively *staring* at me." Satsuki said.

"So what if I was? I'm allowed to stare at my girlfriend." Ryuko returned, placing her hands on her hips and frowning.

"That motorcycle's got the rebel in you coming out, *Matoi*. I'd watch your tongue around me, if I were you." Satsuki warned. She was surprised, however, to find that Ryuko had crossed the space between them in a flash, cupping Satsuki's chin and pulling her face down to the same level, smiling.

"Be careful what you wish for, *Ms. Kiryuin*." Ryuko purred, this time her turn to be the one surprising the other.

Satsuki's eyes widened in surprise and sudden desire, neither of them surprised when Ryuko had slammed Satsuki against the nearest Matsu tree and begun to undo her coat. They kissed like hungry animals as Ryuko wrenched the hem of Satsuki's skirt upwards, pulling her leggings and panties down in equal measure, just enough to get within reach of her prize. Ryuko began to tease Satsuki, small noises escaping between kisses as Ryuko smiled against the other woman's mouth.

"What was that you said about my tongue?" Ryuko muttered breathily as Satsuki moaned, kissing and biting the soft skin of Satsuki's slender neck before kneeling in front of her, her expressive grey eyes staring up into Satsuki's face as she began to work. She relished the pain of Satsuki's hand buried forcefully in her hair, pushing her face even more into her nether regions as Ryuko's tongue worked the different blessed parts of Satsuki's most sensitive place.

Husky moans filled the crisp winter's air, Ryuko deriving most of her own pleasure from hearing that sweet sound as she prayed no one else came venturing down into their secluded grove, enticed by Satsuki's noises of pleasure just as Ryuko was. Ryuko, feeling altogether aroused and wishing to hear Satsuki's moans grow more frequent, plunged a finger inside Satsuki while she worked with her tongue, relishing in the end result. Ryuko conducted Satsuki like an ensemble, bringing her to a final explosive crescendo and hearing the roaring applause of the crowd in Satsuki's trembling thighs as she climaxed.

Ryuko returned to Satsuki's face, enjoying the half-lidded look and panting mouth she was met with. She kissed Satsuki hungrily once again, hoping earnestly that the taste of Satsuki's mouth mixing with the taste of her area further down was as intoxicating for her as it was for Ryuko.

"You certainly know how to sweep me off my feet." Satsuki said, stunned. Ryuko simply smiled before placing another wet kiss on her lips.

"That comes later." she said with a wink.

Fair Game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Satsuki's apartment was every bit as stunning as the first fateful time Ryuko had stepped inside. As always, the sparkling lights of Tokyo prefecture spread out around them, a light snowfall drifting downwards past their perch on this cold Kanto evening. Ryuko's breath frosted against the cold glass as she was just able to make out the glimmering monolith that was the Kiryuin Technologies tower, miles away in Shinjuku. It nestled amongst the rest of the skyscrapers there looking like festive sparklers through the flurry of snowfall.

"Ryuko, everyone's here. It's time."

Ryuko turned from the window, face to face with Satsuki. As always on ocassions such as this, she was stunningly beautiful. Ryuko should have been done being surprised at that fact by now, but every time Satsuki cleaned herself up for some function or business event Ryuko marveled at just how beautiful her girlfriend was.

"Yeah, sure." Ryuko said, moving for the assorted luxurious couches and chairs as Satsuki motioned toward them, smiling.

When Satsuki smiled, Ryuko smiled back. It was as simple as that.

The entire Kiryuin Technologies inner circle had joined together on this night, just a few days before Christmas, to celebrate the five year anniversary of Kiryuin Technologies' founding. Ryuko looked over the assembled company briefly, appraising what had become her de facto friends and family over these past months. The Four, Mako, Hououmaru, and Iori were all sitting, laying or splayed out on different pieces of furniture, ready to hear what Satsuki had to announce.

Nonon patted an open space beside her on the couch, and Ryuko moved to join her, noticing that the pink-haired asassin was surprisingly comfortable with their close proximity. Ryuko shook her head, chalking it up to nerves. Satsuki rarely gathered this many people unless there was something of utmost importance to reveal.

"Thank you all for coming. As I'm sure you all are aware, you comprise the absolute innermost circle of the Kiryuin Technologies machine, and thus will be the first ones privy to the next stage of our development as a company." Satsuki said, her deep voice ringing out as it always did when she made speeches. Ryuko couldn't help but gawk a bit whenever she did this.

Ryuko felt a slight nudge from her side before warm breath spilled into her ear.

"Careful, commander. Close your mouth or you're liable to start drooling." Nonon whispered, just barely audible over Satsuki speaking.

Ryuko furrowed her brows as her cheeks reddened, Nonon simply winking whimsically and returning to listen to Satsuki as the CEO handed out sharp gray portfolios to all present, the eponymous "KT" logo embossed on the front of each.

"In these files I've handed you, you will find all you could possibly want to know about my expansion plans, and how each of you fits into it. As a result of the attack on our headquarters by my mother and her vassals, effective tomorrow we will be expanding our security and military capabilities tenfold and beyond in order to counter the threat presented by her and her forces. Allow me to run through a brief overview, if you will." Satsuki finished, the audience's attention engrossed fully in their respective portfolios.

"Starting with the Four; each of you will be given your own force to command. It's number will start at one hundred per commander, and increase and shift as the situation demands. These forces will be highly specialized based on each of your unique skills, and are as follows: Gamagoori, heavy assault. Sanageyama, close quarters and melee. Inumuta, electronic and cyberwarfare. Jakuzure, stealth and reconnaissance. You'll each be given offices of your own, and lists of potential recruits will be filtered to you as soon as possible. Any questions?" Satsuki finished, shifting her weight and appraising those before her.

"Seems pretty straightforward, Ms. Kiryuin. Thank you for the opportunity." Sanageyama responded, standing from his perch before bowing deeply. The other three members of the security team followed suit, bowing and thanking Satsuki profusely. Satsuki nodded fondly in recognition before continuing.

"Mankanshoku." Satsuki said, directing her gaze down at Mako.

"Oh! Uh, yes ma'am!" She responded, a bright smile lighting up her features.

"You will remain on as Commander Matoi's personal assistant, however I am promoting you to Director of Logistics. You will work behind the scenes and make sure all material and personnel are moving and working to their utmost efficiency. Are you up to the task?" Satsuki asked earnestly.

Mako's brows furrowed, clenching a fist in front of her round face and setting her jaw in determination. Ryuko and Satsuki both couldn't help but smile when she responded, a little too loud for how close they all were.

"I'll do my best, especially if it helps Ryuko-chan!" She squeaked.

"Very good. Iori? I am hereby promoting you to head the new KT Military Research and Development branch. You will oversee all small and large research and engineering projects, starting with construction of a brand new large-scale R&D facility at Kiryuin Technologies tower. Expect the plans on your desk as soon as possible." Satsuki detailed, directing her attention to the long-haired blonde man standing directly behind one of the couches. He clenched a fist over his heart, lowering his head in a sign of deference and gratitude.

"I would be honored, Lady Satsuki." He said respectfully.

"Hououmaru, you will naturally stay on as COO and report company affairs directly to me. You're already the second-highest position in the company, and I can't very well go about replacing myself just yet, can I?" Satsuki said, illiciting a chuckle from the crowd assembled before her. Hououmaru flashed an uncharacteristic smile, bowing her head slightly and folding her hands in her lap.

"Of course, Lady Satsuki. I am grateful to continue working in your service." She said gratefully.

"That just leaves you, Commander Matoi." Satsuki said authoritatively, looking down at Ryuko.

Ryuko's breath caught in her throat as she met Satsuki's eyes, seeing the fire of rock-hard determination and anticipation burning in those ice-blue orbs. Ryuko gritted her teeth, set her jaw, and gave a solitary nod, ready for what was to come. The edges of Satsuki's mouth curved upward as she took a deep breath.

"Effective immediately, the security department is disbanded. The Kiryuin Technologies Military branch will be taking its place, with you at its head. You are to be promoted to the position of Warmaster General, a position created specially by me to oversee every aspect of our military operations from here on out. The security division will be expanded out into the entire floor of Kiryuin Technologies tower that it currently resides in. Iori, the Four, Mako, even Hououmaru at times, will all report directly to you. You will have full control over the unbridled might of our forces all across the globe in the fight against Ragyo Kiryuin and beyond. What say you, Matoi?" Satsuki finished triumphantly, crossing her arms and shifting her weight as if challenging Ryuko to say no to such an exorbitant offer.

Ryuko knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth. If this was being offered, she had earned it. She stood quickly, bowing slightly before whipping her head back up to face Satsuki, the messy shag that was her haircut bobbing around her face as she did so.

"I say yes, ma'am. I'll lead us to victory and keep us all safe. I won't fail." Ryuko snarled, unable to control a sneer as it slowly began to spread on her face.

"Very well. You all have your orders and assignments. Tomorrow the real work begins. But for now..." Satsuki trailed off as she motioned to the back corner of the room, her butler Soroi appearing with a tray overflowing with flutes of champagne.

"For now, let us celebrate our health and the anniversary of our grand experiment. Congratualtions to you all, you've earned it."

The noise level in the apartment began to rise almost immediately as copious amounts of alcohol and food were proffered, festive music playing in the background as the revelry kicked into full swing. Ryuko predicted that this would be a night to remember as she caught a gaze from Nonon across the room that lasted just a little too long.

The night was a smashing success. The expansive dining table was laid out with an assortment of finger foods, from standard Japanese street fare to more western holiday foods. They all ate their fill, drinking even more so. The majority of the night was spent in simple escape from what they did on an almost daily basis, namely enjoying light conversation, lounging around drinking and smoking, and playing stupid party games until the week hours of the morning. Once enough alcohol had been consumed, the party kicked into full swing and the barrier of professionalism completely lifted.

Sanageyama challenged all comers to an arm-wrestling competition, besting the likes of Inumuta, Iori and even somehow Gamagoori before Ryuko stepped up to the plate. It was an intense battle, but eventually Ryuko used a clever distraction tactic to break the stalemate and win the cheers of her subordinates, much to the chagrin of Sanageyama, who began uttering a litany of especially creative curse words in reaction to his loss.

"Face it, monkey. You're just not as manly as our *Warmaster* here!" Nonon said jovially, clapping Ryuko on the shoulder as she stood from the table. Ryuko bumped her hip into Nonon's playfully in response.

"I'll take that as a compliment, ya imp." Ryuko slurred, before Nonon hollered and jumped onto Ryuko's back, riding all the way to the couch where Ryuko plopped her down next to Satsuki before returning to Sanageyama for another round.

Dusting himself off, Sanageyama made to wave Ryuko off as she returned, instead holding out a fresh drink as a peace offering. Ryuko gladly accepted, letting the concoction spill down her throat, contributing to her already considerable buzz.

"So what's the deal with Jakuzure, Uzu? She seems kinda affectionate, don't you think?" Ryuko asked, moving to stand with Sanageyama as they watched proceedings around the room.

"She gets like this around the holidays. I've never quite learned why, but after knowing her as long as I have you learn not to question someone with that kind of temper too often."

Sanageyama responded, both of them watching as Nonon laid her head in Satsuki's lap, Satsuki absentmindely stroking her pink hair as she chatted with Hououmaru on the other side of her.

"Hmm." Ryuko responded, her lack for words embarassingly apparent.

"What's the matter, Matoi? Are you the jealous type?" Sanageyama joked, elbowing her in the arm. Ryuko snorted, taking another prodigious swig from her drink before speaking.

"Please. Not at all. I'm just wondering why someone who usually seems like she hates me is giving me and Satsuki fuck-me eyes from across the room, is all." Ryuko pondered aloud. This time it was Sanageyama's turn to snort.

"Well if it were me, Matoi, I wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth." The muscular, green-haired former gangster said, clapping Ryuko on the back before moving to join Inumuta and Iori in a different part of the room. Ryuko stood by the window for several beats by herself, admiring Nonon's casual dress with a kind of freedom that only alcohol could provide.

She wore a black beanie on her head, covering most of her pink hair except two long sections that framed her face. A red flannel shirt covered her torso, rolled up at the sleeves with a pack of her trademark cigarettes tucked into one sleeve roll. Tight, ripped black jeans were tucked into pink combat boots, done up halfway. All in all, she looked very fashionable, very hip, and most of all predictably punk. Ryuko had to admit that, despite her attitude most of the time and the unbridled joy she took in killing, Nonon was actually pretty cute.

The party went into the wee hours of the morning, most guests trickling out one by one. Ryuko had carried Mako, who had drank just a bit too much and passed out in her lap, into Gamagoori's waiting arms by the large mahogany double doors leading out of the apartment.

"I trust you'll ensure she makes it home safely, Gamagoori." Ryuko said sternly as she handed over care of her small assistant.

"I wouldn't dream of anything different, Captain." Gamagoori responded resolutely. Ryuko believed him, Gamagoori was of fine character and clearly had feelings for Mako. He would

get her home safe even if it took his life and limb.

With the final departure the only guest still inside the apartment was Nonon, lounging on the biggest of the several couches and smoking a cigarette as Ryuko went to visit Satsuki's bedroom to retrieve her phone. As she swiped the device from one of the nightstands, Ryuko was so engrossed in her messages that she almost ran into Satsuki's arm as it was barred across the doorway like a bridge.

Ryuko felt a strong hand take her chin and maneuver it upwards, Satsuki's soft lips pressing to her own lovingly before drawing away and positioning themselves in front of an ear.

"How much have you had to drink?" Satsuki purred before kissing the ear and making Ryuko shiver.

"Enough." Ryuko slurred slightly as her head swam with the sensation and with the drink she had already consumed. Looking into Satsuki's eyes, Ryuko could see the same case there as well.

"Good. I'm going to suggest something, and you may feel free to say no to it with no consequences whatsoever." Satsuki said, mirth spreading across her features as she spoke.

"Okay...shoot." Ryuko said suspiciously.

"I think you should ask Nonon to stay the night." Satsuki whispered, careful not to let her voice carry throughout the rest of the apartment.

Ryuko's eyes widened and she almost dropped her phone.

"S-Seriously? You'd be into that?" Ryuko asked incredulously, her excitement barely concealed.

"Of course. Would you?" Satsuki asked inquisitively.

"Uh, yeah. Absolutely. Just as long as you don't leave me for that bitch afterwards. She had a thing for you, you know." Ryuko mumbled, placing her fists on her hips and rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet. Satsuki leaned down and gave a small peck on Ryuko's cheek, smiling.

"You're the only girl for me, Ryuko Matoi. Now let's go knock the pink out of her hair." Satsuki said, motioning for Ryuko to follow as she headed for the living room.

"Oh *Lady* Satsuki, you're so vulgar!" Ryuko called in mock-offense after her.

Nonon and Ryuko's first kiss was sloppy and uncouth, Ryuko having covered Nonon's mouth with her own the minute she had surprised Nonon by plopping down on the couch next to her from a height completely unacceptable by normal human standards. Nonon had yelped in surprise and began a stream of expletives before being cut off, only being able to mumble "mph!" as Ryuko squeezed her thigh with one hand.

Satsuki had gently set herself down opposite Ryuko behind Nonon, beginning to kiss and bite the soft skin of Nonon's neck as her and Ryuko kissed. Nonon's eyes popped open, widening at the overload of sensation as she was enveloped by her commander and the CEO of their company. Nonon moaned openly into Ryuko's mouth after a few minutes, a slender hand from Satsuki reaching around and cupping a small but supple breast through her shirt as Ryuko's tongue danced in her mouth.

Nonon broke Ryuko's kiss, burying her hands in both Satsuki and Ryuko's hair and pushing their heads towards each other, their kissing like an insanely attractive bridge over Nonon's small body between them. Nonon worked furiously to undo the buttons on her shirt, flinging it away before pulling her tight jeans down and off leaving her only in a black lace bra and panties, not counting the beanie on her head.

Ryuko and Satsuki broke their kiss and looked at each other mischievously, each folding down a cup of Nonon's bra as they rounded on her. Nonon's squeaks and moans were completely unbridled now as Ryuko and Satsuki each took a soft nipple in their mouth, sucking and nipping at them and relishing in making the smallest girl on the couch squirm under their ministrations. Ryuko's hand strayed into the folds of Nonon's panties, resolving to move circles there with a solitary finger and watching Nonon squirm even more.

"Ugh, this is *not* h-happening." Nonon mumbled into the top of Satsuki's head.

"Oh it's happening, Jakuzure. What's the matter, having two beautiful women a bit too much for you?" Ryuko poked, pulling her shirt up and over her head to reveal her own shapely breasts before peeling her bra off slowly.

"N-no way, this is fucking insane. I l-love it..." Nonon trailed off, the three of their heads swimming in drink as Satsuki continued to work on Nonon's nipples, Ryuko sharing a deep kiss with her once more. Satsuki's mouth traveled down and over Nonon's flat stomach, across her navel and further south until she reached the hem of Nonon's panties, looking up expectantly.

"Please." Nonon said, watching as Satsuki first pulled her black dress up and over her head, revealing her thigh-high stockings connected to black panties with a set of garters, large breasts barely contained by a black lace bra which was quickly removed before Satsuki returned the ministrations of her mouth to Nonon's most sensitive place.

Nonon yelped loudly as Satsuki's tongue flicked through her folds, only silenced by a soft nipple shoved into her mouth by the other girl on the couch. Cradling her pink-haired head like a precious object, Ryuko held Nonon's mouth to her breast, moaning along with her as Satsuki happily worked down below.

It went on like this for hours, each woman feeling thoroughly pleasured as they imbibed more drink and were constantly surprised by each other's stamina and fitness. Ryuko and Satsuki discovered that Nonon's flexibility was almost inhuman, which made for several interesting positions and combinations throughout the night. It was a night of debauchery and hedonism the likes of which none of them had seen before, and when it was all said and done they collapsed completely naked into Satsuki's bed and fell asleep almost instantly, Ryuko spooning Nonon's small form as she herself was wrapped in Satsuki's powerful arms.

In the morning, Ryuko awoke to a bed completely devoid of Nonon. Satsuki was awake and sitting up in bed reading on her tablet, her breasts slowly heaving up and down with her measured breaths. A dread formed in Ryuko's heart almost immediately, hoping that nothing of what they did last night would turn out to be regrettable. A solitary note on the nightstand, written in Nonon's handwriting, read:

It was fun. See you at work.

"Hey, you didn't...*feel* anything last night, did you?" Ryuko asked Satsuki nervously.

"Romantically? No, of course not. I told you, you're the only person I love that way." Satsuki responded measuredly. Ryuko sighed in relief.

"Good, me neither." Ryuko said. And she was telling the truth: it was fun, but Ryuko definitely held no romantic feelings toward Nonon.

"Nonon's kinda hot though, right?" Ryuko asked mischievously, a sneer spreading across her face.

"Don't push your luck." Satsuki snorted, shaking her head.

Ryuko grumbled in mock-frustration before rolling over and going back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, that just happened.

The Thin Red Line

One year later.

They were all warned it would get worse.

For a large chunk of the world, that was certainly true. Ryuko still had to decide whether it had gotten worse for her as well. She supposed that in the end, it would be fairly clear. Now though...now, the nature of everything was obscured.

The war had begun shortly after that fateful night one year ago; the last celebration they would and could have until it was all over. Under Ryuko and Satsuki's command, Kiryuin Technologies forces had marched west across the vast wastes of China and Russia, gaining ground and infrastructure. As Satsuki predicted, Ragyo Kiryuin, hiding under the guise of a simple fashion magnate, had secretly seized control of REVOCs Global Security, the largest private army in the world, and its CEO Takiji Kuroido through a series of shadow corporations and coercion techniques. As such, Ryuko and Satsuki's moves had been countered at every turn once KT forces had entered western Europe, which was under REVOCs complete control.

Japan had thankfully been spared much of the violence related to the war, but multiple fronts had opened up across China, Russia and Eastern Europe over the past year and an almost total stalemate had been reached. It was an all-out war against tyranny, but if something were not done soon to turn the tide, Ryuko feared the stalemate would slowly bleed them all dry.

Ryuko's boots stomped against the spotless white floor of the barren hallway, leading to a large hangar and constuction area in the underground research division under KT tower that had been constructed rapidly during the past year. Her tight black leggings were tucked into the high combat boots, layered under an official-looking high-waisted skirt. Her hands were in the pockets of a long black coat, left open and thrown on over her pressed button-up white shirt. The tails of the jacket moved and swished behind her as she walked briskly, reaching one hand up to adjust the red and black military-style officer's cap on her head.

As she did so, the sleeve of the jacket dipped slightly, revealing a small part of the intricate series of tattoos that now criss-crossed her right arm. Ryuko frowned, tugging the sleeve back

down into place. She had no regrets about dotting her body with the art now present there, but she wasn't completely open to showing it off as much as she'd like. There was still much to discuss with certain people in her life about it, and as Ryuko rubbed the septum piercing still sore in her nose, she was reminded of just how much had changed in the last year. How much further could this war go before she completely abandoned her humanity...?

"Commander, thank you for coming. This should be quite the unveiling."

Shaken from her reverie, Ryuko halted at the entrance to a large, darkened chamber. The only light was a spotlight, lighting the spot she was standing in and the solitary figure of Shirou Iori, now head of the Kiryuin Technologies Military R&D branch. He saluted snappily, the hand falling as fast as it had raised as soon as Ryuko returned the gesture. Letting out a long breath, Ryuko removed her officer's cap and ran a hand through her always-messy hair, almost having forgotten the purpose of her visit to this large artificial underground cavern in the first place.

"What've you got, Iori?" Ryuko asked, glancing quickly around the chamber. Nothing was visible as of yet.

"Nothing so inconsequential as to tear you away from your countless duties for no reason, Warmaster. Allow me to present, with little to no pomp and circumstance, my magnum opus. The *Dagger*." Iori proclaimed, pressing a button on the remote in his hand.

Lights around the chamber began to hum and flick on one by one, revealing that the room was indeed much bigger than Ryuko had initially predicted. Easily the size of an airplane hangar, the chamber housed a sleek and sinister shape in the center of the space, easily 600 feet long and sitting in what seemed to be a drydock built around it.

It was a vessel of some kind, sweeping from a raised, windowed bridge in the rear to a sharp and pointed bow at the front. On either side of the vessel were two large pods, presumably the propulsion system, a pair towards the bow and another towards the stern. Large turrets dotted the upper deck, with smaller cannons spread out even further around the hull. The underside was large and flat, armored and covered with a hexagonal pattern. Ryuko had to fight to keep her mouth from falling open.

"Iori...what in the *hell* am I looking at here?" Ryuko implored, astounded.

Iori simply smiled proudly, folding his arms across his chest and beginning to lead Ryuko around the massive vessel.

"Commander, you are looking at the product of almost nine months of round-the-clock work by the entire Kiryuin Technologies R&D branch. The *Dagger* is a first of its kind hovership, an aerial battleship and troop carrier capable of low-orbit flight and extended periods of deployment impossible with other aerial vehicles."

Ryuko stared up at the massive bladed prow of the ship as they moved past it, the only part of the vessel that wasn't jet-black. It was painted a dull maroon, and the Kiryuin Technologies logo was emblazoned in black over the new coat of red paint. Under the logo in large stencilled letters was the word "Dagger" in English, next to which was painted the kanji "Kaiken" (懐剣), the Japanese word for Dagger. Ryuko smiled at the attention to detail.

"You'll notice there are four main railgun batteries mounted on the upper deck for heavy combat, as well as an array of missile pods and point defense cannons mounted across the length of the ship, covering almost every possible approach angle. The four main engines, mounted at the fore and aft of the hull on either side, are capable of operating at full power for days on end without the need for cooldown. Finally, the hexagonal pattern on the underside of the hull are the series of ejection doors, for the ship's complement of drop pods."

Ryuko raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Drop pods?" Ryuko asked, looking to Iori. He smirked devilishly, unable to hide his excitement behind his trademark orange breathing mask.

"Yes, commander. Drop pods. The ship's complement sits at one hundred, each capable of carrying up to five heavy assault troops per pod. At the snap of a finger, five hundred shock troops can be launched from low orbit and be on the ground, anywhere in the world, in minutes." Iori finished, looking as proud of his work as ever.

"Iori, this is...well, it's incredible! This is going to be an immensely important asset to have in the war against Ragyo and REVOCs. How long until she's in the air?" Ryuko asked, ecstatic.

"Well, our earliest estimates say sometime around next month-"

CLACK.

Iori was cut off mid-sentence by a door sliding open near the uppermost gantries of the immense hangar, a hundred feet above them. Spotlights beamed down at them from the direction of the portal, and as the two looked upwards at the figure sheathed in light standing there, the smack of a high heel hitting metal rang out before a booming female voice echoed throughout the hangar like a husky explosion.

"Warmaster Matoi, report to the CEO's office at once. That is all."

The figure in the doorway high up above glared down at them, both hands on the top of the hilt of a long white katana balanced in front of her, feet shoulder width apart. Her long black hair whipped behind her, blown by the immense cooling fans set into one side of the uppermoast reaches of the hangar wall. Iori bowed his head in deference next to Ryuko as she placed her officer's cap back on her head, straightening it with a tug and staring up at the figure, their eyes piercing into each other even from this distance.

As soon as she appeared, the figure turned purposefully and strode away, sword clutched in one strong hand and black hair continuing to churn gracefully behind her like fitful smoke. Ryuko sneered, shaking her head and placing a hand on Iori's shoulder as he brought his head out of its bowed position.

"Sorry, Iori. I'll have to cut this meeting short. It seems our beloved CEO prefers obscene theatrics as of late." Ryuko said before marching off towards the elevator.

"Y-yes, of course, Warmaster." Iori said shakily before turning to stare back at his beloved creation, the thumping of Ryuko's boots against the floor fading off into obscurity.

Satsuki had long ago given Ryuko her own keycard access to the CEO's office, but so far Ryuko had not used it once when she knew Satsuki was inside. She preferred the simplicity and privacy of knocking, always longing for the sound of Satsuki's voice beckoning her inside with a demure "Come in".

This time, however, as Ryuko's boots once again stomped on a pristine floor in a white hallway, her coat swishing behind her lazily, the door to Satsuki's office swung open just before she could reach her hand out and knock. Satsuki stood in the doorway, her trademark white business suit pressed and perfect, a drab long military coat hanging from her shoulders, sleeves hanging unused. In one hand she held her sword, the same pristine white katana with the onyx-black blade that she had used to kill Nui Harime and save Ryuko.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in weeks, Satsuki." Ryuko said, approaching the open door with purpose. As she entered the office, Satsuki smiled sadly at her before closing and locking the door. She looked slightly more drawn, her skin having a little bit less shine. She looked tired.

"That's because you haven't. I've got angry investors breathing down my neck ever since the war started." Satsuki responded, showing a level of vulnerablity reserved only for Ryuko.

"Yeah, well. We both knew what we were getting into-"

Clack.

Ryuko was cut off by abother clack, this time much softer than the one in the hangar. Ryuko whirled around, her long coat spinning a graceful circle in the air, to find Satsuki down on one knee, propping herself up with her sword and panting heavily. Her breaths were shallow and rattling.

"Satsuki!" Ryuko called worriedly, rushing to her girlfriend's side, concerned.

"It's...nothing-" Satsuki managed between huffs, before being cut off by Ryuko.

"Oh, shut up. This is *not* nothing. Here, hold on-" Ryuko swept Satsuki up in her arms easily, carrying her shapely form over to the couch in the long-repaired office and laying her down gently, her chest rising and falling with each shallow breath. Ryuko removed her jacket, placing it over Satsuki like a blanket before rolling up the sleeves of her shirt. She raced to the small refrigerator hidden in one wall and retrieved a cold bottle of water, sprinting it back to Satsuki and opening it for her.

"Listen Sats, you're gonna have to drink some of this, okay?" Ryuko implored, Satsuki nodding in recognition before sitting up and gulping down half the bottle, smiling weakly when she was done.

"Haven't slept...in thirty hours...no food or water either...mistake..." Satsuki managed between wheezes.

"Yeah, no shit *mistake* . Wait one minute." Ryuko said, kissing Satsuki gingerly on the forehead before getting up and striding to unlock and open the office door, peeking her head out at the secretary in the lobby.

"Hey, Yuuki. Do me a favor and order like, three orders of the lunch special from the sushi place down on the corner. Just use this-" Ryuko tossed the girl her wallet.

"-and call me on my phone when it's here. Thanks." Ryuko finished, closing the door quietly and locking it. She kicked off her boots, shuffling over to the spot where Satsuki's sword had fallen. She picked it up, feeling the weight of the powerful weapon in her hands comfortably. It wasn't really her style, but Ryuko knew that it suited Satsuki perfectly.

"It was a gift, from my father...before he died." Satsuki called to her softly, her rattling breaths having subsided now that she had laid down for a bit. Ryuko moved back over to her, propping the sword against the wall at the head of the couch and returning to her seat by Satsuki's side.

"Was he the one that named it *Bakuzan* ?" Ryuko asked. Satsuki closed her eyes and nodded, almost imperceptibly. She sighed sadly.

"'A strong sword for a strong girl', he said..." Satsuki muttered wistfully.

"You never told me what happened to your Dad..." Ryuko said carefully. Satsuki's jaw tightened slightly.

"He died in an auto accident shortly after he gave me *Bakuzan* . The police ruled it an accident, but I have my suspicions that Mother was involved somehow. That that wretched woman would stoop so low as to kill her own husband would not surprise me in the least..." Satsuki said through clenched teeth, her face awash with pain. Ryuko reached a hand up and brushed errant strands of hair from Satsuki's face before cupping her cheek fondly.

"Let's talk about something else, yeah?" Ryuko said, meeting eyes with Satsuki and smiling warmly. Satsuki returned it, her eyes wandering to Ryuko's right arm. She touched the intricate tattoo there, running from her hand all the way up under her sleeve up to her shoulder.

"Very well. When are you going to tell me the meaning of this?" Satsuki implored weakly, running her hand lazily up and down Ryuko's soft skin.

"Since you're so insistent...fine." Ryuko said, rolling her sleeve up even further to the top of the tattoo. Ryuko ran her finger up the design, tracing the whirls of a solitary red line that ran parallel to a black spiked one, not dissimilar to a vine. The red line ended with a spool of thread, the black with an unintelligible thicket.

" *This* is the red thread of fate. It binds people together who were fated to meet during their lifetimes. If you believe in that sort of thing, there's probably a red thread dangling between us right now. The black vine represents my own ambition and how it can be both a powerful weapon and a terrible curse." Ryuko finished, rolling her sleeve back down and returning her gaze to Satsuki.

"It's...beautiful." Satsuki said, Ryuko smiling with a small amount of relief.

"But, why? Why did you need a tattoo to remind you of this?" Satsuki inquired. Ryuko thought for several ticks before beginning to spell out her answer, taking several deep breaths in between sentences.

"I realized soon after I got them that the tattoos and piercings are a part of my reaction to feeling consumed by this war. It's like I'm trying to leave a trail of breadcrumbs back to myself, or like taking a picture of your girlfriend to war. Reminders of my own humanity; reminders that there was something before all this and that there will be something after."

Satsuki smiled softly, placing a weak hand on Ryuko's cheek fondly. Ryuko cupped it in her own, returning the expression.

"You are so poetic sometimes; I adore it utterly." Satsuki whispered, pulling Ryuko's face down for a long, soft kiss.

Ryuko's phone began to vibrate, signalling the arrival of their sushi. Squeezing Satsuki's hand, Ryuko returned to the door to retreive the food. When she came back, Satsuki was already fast asleep, clutching a handful of Ryuko's coat in one hand and breathing softly. Ryuko smiled, setting the sushi down on the large coffee table and resolved to eat, letting Satsuki go a bit longer before making her eat.

Ryuko always had difficulty waking her up. Despite her immense power and dignified stature, Satsuki really was adorable when she slept.

Unknown

For what had to be the millionth time in so many days, Ryuko was left with the sound of her boots hitting the floor, and nothing else. The floor of Kiryuin Technologies Tower that housed the offices of Ryuko, the elite four and Mako was surprisingly quiet at this time of day. No subordinates rushed materials back and forth, no phones rang incessantly, no screams of overbearing commanders chewing out new recruits ringing through the halls. It was this very quiet that lulled Ryuko into a near-catatonic state as she walked, already tired from the day's events.

It was because of this quiet that she almost ran headfirst into Iori turning the corner towards the elevator.

"C-Commander! I'm terribly sorry-" He began, catching Ryuko by the shoulders as they nearly collided. She chuckled, placing the heel of her hand to her forehead and attempting to shake the weariness from her mind.

"'S alright, Iori. What are you doing up here?" Ryuko asked. Iori straightened himself, cupping his chin with one hand and looking thoughtful.

"Meeting Inumuta to discuss some further modifications to the *Dagger*. The propulsion and maneuvering systems are all top-notch...a little *too* top-notch, I'm afraid. All of our best pilot candidates are having touble with even basic maneuvers in simulations. I'm afraid that until we develop a more user-friendly pilot interface, the *Dagger* will remain grounded..." Iori said, trailing off. He looked uncharacteristically defeated, a slight sadness in his eyes that belied something much deeper.

"I have faith in you, Iori. You're the best damn engineer I know. If anyone can do it, it's you." Ryuko said, placing a hand on Iori's shoulder before moving past him towards the elevator. Iori pushed his glasses up on his nose, a slight rosiness creeping onto his pale cheeks.

"T-Thank you, commander. I won't let you down." He called back to her as she boarded the elevator for the garage level. Ryuko smiled again, waving as the doors slid shut.

Once alone, the grin slipped from her cheeks, exhausted. Reaching into her trademark white and black leather jacket, Ryuko retrieved a half-empty carton of cigarettes, slapping it against her hand in anticipation of entering the garage.

Sucking the blessed, cursed smoke down, Ryuko approached her steed. A black and red motorcycle of Japanese make, it was one of a select few gasoline vehicles still on the road this far into the age of the electric vehicle. Ryuko snorted, remembering Satsuki's face the first time she had seen and heard it. She looked down her nose at it, like she did with so much, as if it was an object to be cast aside instead of appreciated. Ryuko didn't care, she loved her bike. And...

She loved that look, too.

Screaming through the bustling streets of Tokyo, Ryuko headed speedily towards her one destination before turning in for the night. A small post office box, hidden among several nondescript others in a small alcove deep within the city's heaving center. Ryuko smoked her cigarette to the bone as her clothes billowed softly in the wind whipping past her.

Keyring jingling, Ryuko unlocked the small box once she had arrived and emptied its contents. Mostly spam, a few work-related items. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"Huh?" Ryuko said, moving to close the box before she noticed a small brown envelope, folded in half and nestled comfortably into the far back of the small space within the box. Removing it, she unfolded it carefully, noticing that while her name and address was printed legibly on the front of the small parcel, no return address was listed. Ryuko cocked a suspicious eyebrow, ripping the top from the envelope and pulling out its contents.

Inside was a small, scratchily written letter and a small gold key. Ryuko unfolded the letter first.

Ryuko,

Drop whatever you're doing and go immediately to the address listed on the back of this letter.

Use the key.

Everything will be explained there.

Ryuko's mouth hung open, unable to recognize neither the handwriting nor the cause of the message. Flipping the letter over, Ryuko took in the address listed, scratched onto the page hurriedly. It wasn't far from where she was, but...what if it was a trap? Ryuko thought long and hard about the numerous enemies she had made during this war, but none were cunning nor resourceful enough to find such an obscure mailing address in such a large city.

"Only one way to find out..." Ryuko muttered, stuffing the letter into her jacket pocket and making her way back to her motorcycle.

Ryuko could feel Tokyo's heart heaving around her. Buried deep within the inner city, Ryuko's boots splashed through puddles of who-knows-what as she picked her way carefully down a darkened alley. The sun was setting, playing off the tall, pristine buildings climbing high above her like assorted mirrors in the darkening sky. Steam rose lazily from a manhole across the way as she neared a solitary steel roll-up garage door, unmarked and set at the end of the alley as if an afterthought in some urban planner's mind.

The sound of a vehicle passing quickly down the small avenue at the other end of the alley startled Ryuko, the whine of its electric motor climbing up and back down again as it passed. Ryuko was already on edge, mysterious parcels with no return address in her private mailbox aside. Carefully, she reached into her jacket, withdrawing both the small key and her ever-present sidearm with one hand. There was a thick padlock set into the bottom of the door near the pull-up handle, and it clicked open with surprising ease as the key entered and turned.

Wrenching upwards, Ryuko heaved the door up and open, waving the dust clouds unsettled by the motion away with one hand, covering the small space inside with the other holding her weapon. The storage lockup was completely barren, and as Ryuko glanced around she at first thought this had all been a wild goose chase. That is, until she spied a small, softball-sized

metal sphere sitting directly in the center of the unit. Moving closer to it, Ryuko's gun hand snapped up almost immediately, grasping with her other to steady her aim.

The small sphere had emitted a blue fan of light when she stepped closer, moving slowly from her feet all the way to the top of her head, before beeping twice and disappearing. Ryuko cocked an eyebrow, unnerved slightly by the unknown nature of all this. Although the object seemed harmless, Ryuko didn't want to rule out the possibility that it could be a trap.

Some questions were answered and others were raised when the object began to hum, emitting motes of light that fluttered around the small space like fireflies.

They coalesced into a rough shape, slightly shorter in stature than Ryuko and vaguely humanoid. More and more detail came in a short time to the hologram, the lower half resolving into dress pants and smart shoes, the torso covered by a military dress shirt and white lab coat. The figure's back was slightly hunched, the head resolving into that of an older man's, possibly late 60s, with a long white beard and equally long white hair, an eyepatch placed over one eye. His other burned with a quiet fury and determination, his mouth set into a slight scowl around an ornate old tobacco pipe.

Ryuko's heart pounded. She staggered back a step, lowering her weapon slightly. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. The hologram fully resolved, now almost completely indistinguishable from an actual human being. Meeting Ryuko's eyes with his one, the old man throughtfully took his pipe from between his lips, blowing a cloud of smoke.

"Hello, Ryuko." He said in a gravelly voice.

There could be no doubt now. Ryuko was sure of it. It was him.

"D-Dad?! What...how...?" Ryuko said, trailing off in disbelief.

"I am a holographic program, left behind in the event of Isshin Matoi's death. I have been programmed to answer any questions you might have, as well as impart my creator's last wishes upon you, Ryuko." The hologram said, Ryuko's shoulders sagging as she placed her

sidearm back into its place inside her jacket. She had no hope left that her father might be alive, but to find this was just a glorified twenty questions machine was a bit frustrating.

"Why did it take so long? It's been over four years since my father's death at this point." Ryuko started, folding her arms and shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"Isshin Matoi instructed this program and his subordinates to only make contact once one of several different eventualities had been reached. Your current position at Kiryuin Technologies is one of those eventualities, and thus contact was made through the most discreet channel available." The hologram said, blowing another lungful of imaginary smoke.

"Why is my father even making contact at all? He never had enough time for me when I was a kid, why would he be factoring me into his last wishes now?" Ryuko asked, frustration barely contained in her voice.

"Despite his shortcomings as a father, Isshin Matoi loved and respected you very much. Unfortunately his time spent attempting to free the world from tyranny and make it a better place for his daughter took a toll on the time he could spend with you, a fact he regretted to the grave. He saw the woman you became up until his death, and resolved to put all of his faith and legacy in you should he ever be killed." The hologram answered.

Ryuko felt a strange mixture of relief and confusion at the program's words. On the one hand, hearing that her father did indeed love and respect her was heartening to be sure. However, the fact that he rarely if ever said these words to her in real life was reminder enough of his shortcomings, and hearing a fake, computerized version of himself impart these words was slightly unsettling to say the least.

"If that is all the questions you have, I shall now play a message recorded by Isshin Matoi informing you of his last wishes. Shall I begin?" The hologram asked, quirking an eyebrow in a manner all too similar to Ryuko's own.

"Begin." She said begrudgingly, her folded arms growing tighter around her chest. The hologram skipped and shifted slightly, the face now displaying slightly more emotion than before. The signature pipe was gone, and the remaining eye looked altogether more tired than before. The mouth curled into a small smile as he addressed Ryuko.

"Ryuko. Let me begin by saying something I'm sure many fathers have had to say to their children: I'm sorry. For not being there for you, for being wrapped up in my work so often, for not doing more for your mother while she was still alive...it must be but a pittance to hear these words now, but know that they are true."

Ryuko's grip on herself loosened slightly.

"If you're hearing this, then the worst has come to pass and I've been killed. You've always been a strong girl, so I won't need to tell you not to grieve too long for me. I don't know when this will reach you either way. Let my death be a lesson for you, as I'm sure that lesson is in the process of being learned if it hasn't been already. Keep your guard up, keep your loved ones close, and take no prisoners. Either way, I'm so very proud of you, Ryuko. Even today as I record this, you've become such a strong and noble woman, surpassing even my wildest expectations and crushing my darkest fears. I can only imagine the woman you are now, listening to this message heaven knows when and where."

Ryuko's arms fells to her side, her mouth slightly agape and no longer hard-set. Her father's words were making her heart pound in her chest, head swimming.

"While it won't make up for my shortcomings in life, perhaps this gift I shall impart upon you in death will have at least some meaning and use to you. The holo-projector on the floor in front of you contains a small data drive, containing schematics and coordinates for a top-secret facility I and my team used for my most advanced of projects. I encourage you to go there as soon as possible, but beware: my enemies have likely heard of the place, if they haven't already found it. Once there, you will meet...a friend of mine." Ryuko's father finished after a pause, his smile growing wider and fonder.

"He's no doubt been there since I had to leave, and will be eagerly awaiting your arrival. He should be a capable and trustworthy ally in your fight against tyrrany and injustice, as he has been mine."

Her father took a long, contemplative pause, pondering his next words.

"Be careful, Ryuko. Fulfill your destiny as my daughter, and finish what I've started. I shant see you again...I love you." With that, the hologram winked out, leaving Ryuko standing alone in the entryway to the storage unit, now completely dark after the sunset had finished minutes ago. Ryuko reached a hand up to her cheek and felt a streak of wetness there, surprising herself. Her father's words were astoundingly affectionate and genuine, and it had caught her completely off-guard.

Sitting gingerly against one wall of the barren storage unit, Ryuko moved the sphere around in her hands over and over, pondering all that she had heard. Who was this "friend" of her father's? Could he be trusted? Where was this top-secret facility, and had it already been ransacked by any number of enemies in thefour years since her father's death?

The questions swam in Ryuko's mind for minutes upon minutes, before finally deciding upon a rough course of action and squashing them down under the weight of her own purpose. Reaching into the pocket of her jeans, Ryuko retrieved her phone and pressed Satsuki's name in her contacts. After a few short rings, the welcome sound of her girlfriend's voice once again filled her ear.

"Ryuko, I wasn't expecting to hear from you tonight. Everything alright?" She said, a small smirk appearing on Ryuko's face as she listened.

"Totally fine. There's been some developments, and I have news. I'm coming over." Ryuko returned.

"Very well. I do love it when you're forceful, Ryuko." Satsuki shot back, the smirk on her lips apparent even through the phone.

The Man in the High Castle

Time during battle was a strange and distorted thing.

On a snowy, wind-swept and rocky slope high in the Himalayas, five warriors battled for their lives amidst the slow passage of this battle-time. Warmaster General Ryuko Matoi led them, crouched behind a large boulder and spraying the skull-helmeted figures up the slope with an indescriminate barrage of fire from her assault rifle. The optics on her armored suit's cowl fogged with the heat dispensed from changing magazines, and she used the back of her gauntlet to wipe them clean as she scanned the slope around her, the passage of time slowed to an adrenaline-induced crawl.

Behind a boulder five meters away from the Warmaster, the smallest member of her team cycled the bolt on her sniper rifle, the pink-hued glow of her suit's optics brightening as she lifted her head briefly from the rifle's scope. Ryuko watched as a steaming shell longer than her middle finger flipped up and away from the breach, spinning delicately and slowly, trailing white smoke that left a trail in the air like a burnt after-image.

Further away an armored giant with burning orange optics turned his head toward Ryuko, a single question mark appearing on the section of her suit's HUD dedicated to communication. She sent an answer, and it was as much as she could do to receive the giant's return acknowledgement before he rose from his hiding spot, heavy machine gun in his powerful hands barking as he decimated the enemy's superior position in preparation for what came next.

Together they rose, like blackened ghosts lifting from a bank of fog, firing their weapons in unison as their armor-enhanced strength carried them through the thick snow to close the gap with their hated enemy. Skull-helmeted figures fired at them wildly, their shots travelling wide under the concentrated barrage of the Kiryuin Technologies charge. The front line mere meters away, Ryuko smiled devilishly as she signalled the two figures furthest back in their group to engage.

With them in the fight, the battle was minutes from ending.

A lithe, muscular warrior with a solid band of forest-green optics wrapping around his cowl like a *hachimaki* flew past Ryuko, firing his combat shotgun from the hip on full auto, spraying the snow around him with steaming blood as he emptied his magazine into their enemies at almost point-blank range. Ryuko's heart skipped a beat as she saw an enemy leap from over a high rock, careening downwards toward her shotgunning warrior, his back turned. Raising her assault rifle towards the threat, she realized with frightening certainty as the bulky warrior fell at a painfully slow pace: she wouldn't be able to save her subordinate.

Her friend.

Suddenly all was noise and fury, lasting only a fraction of a second but wreaking havok and destruction on an unparallelled scale. The team froze, blinking several times within their helmets as all gunfire aimed at them ceased immediately. Above them on the mountainside, so stoic as to completely ignore the cold and snowy wind whipping around them, stood a black spectre of death. Her black-armored body stood perfectly still, her cowled head with deep blue optics craned slightly so as to survey the scene around her. The black-bladed katana she held in her left hand dripped with blood, steaming furiously in the cold air like everything else she touched. Dismembered bodies lay smoking with released heat in the snow around her, dark maroon blotches slowly growing larger as the seeds of her actions were sewn.

They all looked upon her with reverence and awe, knowing that Satsuki Kiryuin, CEO of Kiryuin Technologies, was the deadliest woman any of them would ever know.

"No doubt about it, they're definitely REVOCs shock troops. Looks like we caught 'em just as they arrived. Lucky for us they didn't have time to get inside before we opened up." Sanageyama said, rising from the corpse nearest to a large rock overhang even further up the mountain's slope. A large steel door was set into its sheer rock face, rusted with neglect and easy to overlook.

Ryuko stared down in disgust at the commando's body, a large and bloody slash wound criss-crossing his chest. The helmets REVOCs troops used were clearly based on Japanese *kabuki* masks, grotesque and contorted skulls meant to terrify their opponents in battle. Luckily it would take more than petty scare-tactics to frighten Warmaster Matoi and her strike team.

"Lucky for us we had our benevolent CEO and her prodigious sword skills, then." Ryuko said, glancing toward where Satsuki stood, her posture perfect even in the heavy armored suit. She nodded slowly, checking over the pistol she held in one hand before re-drawing Bakuzan with the other.

"Alright people, form up and prepare to breach. Gamagoori, set charges on the door." Ryuko ordered, the rest of them stacking up on either side of the rock outcrop, weapons loaded and in hand.

Soon light, sound and exploded fragments of rock and metal filled their vision as they tumbled one by one into the dark mouth of the exploded doorway, switching their optics to night-vision mode and scanning every corner of the pitch-black, cavernous space multiple times. Shouts of "clear"rang out in Ryuko's cowl as her team completed their quick scan of the large space inside the abandoned facility, noticing no immediate threats and relaxing noticeably.

"Sanageyama, Gamagoori, Jakuzure. Spread out, see if you can find a switchboard and turn the power on." Ryuko ordered, standing from her tactical crouch and strolling to Satsuki's position, shouldering her assault rifle.

Satsuki placed her pistol in the holster on her hip before spinning Bakuzan gracefully into the ornate white scabbard attached to her back. Standing beside the CEO, Ryuko selected Inumuta's name in the comms panel inside her cowl's display.

"Inumuta, we've made entrance into the facility. These are definitely my father's coordinates, but as of now we've had no further developments. What's your status?" Ryuko inquired.

"All's quiet in the air as of now, commander. No guarantees that will remain constant, however." He replied matter-of-factly.

"Alright. Continue circling the facility and remain in stealth mode. Depending on what we find we might need a quick escape."

"I shall continue maneuvers, commander. Inumuta out."

Ryuko rolled her head around, cycling her shoulders back and forth to try and relieve the tension built up in her body by the battle. Adrenaline was incredibly useful during times of conflict and danger, but unfortunately the feeling it left a soldier with after it had subsided was less than desirable to someone of Ryuko's skill level.

"Matoi, I've got a power station over here!" Nonon yelled from across the room as she shouldered her immense rifle, flipping several large breakers set into the wall.

As a deep hum filled the large space, huge generators rumbled the floor beneath their feet as they powered to life once again. The overhead lights began to switch on one by one, negating the use of their suits' nightvision and flooding the chamber in a harsh, artifical glow. Ryuko deactivated her suit's cowl, the armored casing around her head folding down and backwards allowing her to see with her own eyes, breathing in the musty scent of a place not touched by human hands in years.

The space was large and rectangular, and Ryuko noted that it looked similar to pictures of a NASA mission control room that she had seen. Banks of computers and control consoles sat in several rows on either side of the chamber, a central aisle splitting them down the middle leading to a large screen set into the back wall, complete with its own set of advanced consoles. Catwalks lined the upper edges of the room like balconies in an opera house.

Ryuko felt a strong grip on her shoulder, turning just in time to see the menacing cowl of Satsuki's suit follow hers and fold down and back, revealing a small smile on her girlfriend's face as her long black hair spilled downwards across her shoulders.

"You look better like this." Satsuki said, gesturing to Ryuko's now-uncovered face jovially. Ryuko chuckled sarcastically.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll keep the cowl on next time we get into some fighting. I might look fine like this but this look would be kinda screwed by a hole in my head."

"Agreed. Although-"

"...more..." Satsuki's thought was cut off, a deep and far-off voice echoing through the chamber as if blown in by the wind.

"Did you hear that?" Ryuko asked, her head snapping up and around, attempting to see if any REVOCs commandos had indeed breached the facility without their knowledge.

"Yes. It sounded like someone's voice, but there's no one here..." Satsuki said questioningly.

"...More..." The voice repeated, louder this time. Ryuko's eyes met Satsuki's for a split second before both of their suits' armored cowls crept up to cover their heads once again, Ryuko's assault rifle flying to her hands and Satsuki drawing Bakuzan and her pistol so quickly that the gesture was near-instantaneous.

"Commander, I am receiving some strange readings from my suit. Where is that voice coming from?" Gamagoori said through gritted teeth.

"I don't know, but I'm getting them too." Ryuko replied, slowly cycling her rifle around the chamber, sighting for a target that clearly wasn't there.

"Commander, is everything alright in there? Your suit's status indicator just flashed KIA for a split second." Inumuta's concerned voice crept through Ryuko's comm unit.

"I don't know, Inumuta. We're getting some weird readings in here too. Something's in here with us." Ryuko responded.

"...GIVE. ME. MORE!" The disembodied voice screamed, power surging throughout the facility as lights set into the ceiling exploded and sparks rained down on them. All five of them sprinted and ducked for cover in every which way as the facility was thrown back into total darkness, the only light source provided whenever a console sparked and sputtered.

Ryuko peered up and over a console she had sheltered behind after a few moments, seeing that the large screen built into the chamber's back wall was slowly fading into life. Bathed in the dim light of the screen, Ryuko stood carefully and made her way towards it, a strange image beginning to materialize across the lighted rectangle. The rest of her team, still in cover, aimed their weapons carefully at whatever they could, still confused as to the nature of the threat.

The image on the screen materialized fully, a strange symmetrical pair of shapes, one side an immense red, orange and yellow eye, the other a simple black mirror image of the eye with a large cross through it. Ryuko's cowl folded down once again, facing the screen and cocking an eyebrow.

"Who are you to enter my domain and provide me with only partial power? Flip the remainder of the breakers. I demand it." A deep, brooding voice said moodily. Ryuko glanced around but as usual, the voice came from the very walls themselves.

"Who am I speaking to?" Ryuko demanded of the voice.

"I shall answer no questions until this facility has been fully powered. Give me more power immediately." The voice struck back, sounding to Ryuko like a petulant child. Ryuko sighed, motioning to Nonon to flip the remainder of the breakers into the on position. The facility hummed again, lights returning to their normal brightness as a pleased sigh echoed from the walls.

"Thank you. I apologize for my previous behavior, but this facility is barely holding together as it is. Now, to whom am I speaking?" The voice asked, the tone considerably more formal and organized. Ryuko shook her head, already annoyed by these wild swings in emotion.

"I am Warmaster General Ryuko Matoi of Kiryuin Technologies. Who the hell are you?" Ryuko asked, unable to hide the irritation in her voice.

"Matoi...? You couldn't be...General Matoi's daughter?" The voice pondered incredulously.

"The very same. I was given these coordinates by him, and told to expect an 'old friend' to be waiting here for me. Mind explaining who you are and what exactly we're doing here?" Ryuko spat, placing her hands on her hips and shifting her weight.

"Very well." The voice sighed.

"I am an advanced defense artifical intelligence, created by General Matoi and his team several years ago for use as logistical support and command assistance in large warzones. He finished me shortly before his...untimely demise, and I have been here ever since, waiting."

"Waiting for who?" Ryuko asked, incredulous.

"For you, Ryuko." The voice responded simply.

Ryuko was dumbfounded. She had expected some sort of expert or engineer that they could use, but a defense AI? She was convinced that such things only existed in science fiction. Yet here one was, and she was talking to it. Things continued to get more and more interesting.

"Alright, how easy is it going to be to get you out of here?" Ryuko asked.

"Not difficult. I can transfer my consciousness to a trasport storage device, but it will take time." It responded.

"Do it." Ryuko said, signalling Inumuta to bring the tilt-jet in for pickup. After several beats, her thoughts trailed off as she whirled around to face the large screen once again, the sleek singular eye meeting hers inquisitively.

"One more thing. You gotta name?" Ryuko inquired.

"Hm...I was never given an official designation, so...no. However, there is something General Matoi and high-level members of his team would call me from time to time."

"Oh yeah? And what's that?"

"Senketsu."

Clear and Present Danger

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone! Obligatory apology for being away for so long, I have had some wicked writer's block as of late. Anyways we're getting close to the big climax (heh) so see if you can look past my unoriginal writing style and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stale smoke hung in wisps in the vacant meeting room, rays of fluorescent light shining dimly through the layered vapors. In front of the only window stood a figure in a long black coat and military hat, adding to the smoke already hanging in the air like an industrial plant working furiously to meet some sordid quota. Ryuko surveyed the view from the lone window, blowing long drags from her smoldering cigarette out of her lungs in an even more rapid succession than usual, remarking nervously on the busy scene on the other side of the glass.

The long window overlooked a familiar sight: the hangar built in secret within the Kiryuin Technologies subterranean research facility; the very same hangar that Ryuko had caught her first glimpse of Shirou Iori's finest invention to date, the massive hovership *Dagger*. The imposing hull of the ship itself presided over the hectic scene, sitting a good thirty meters above the lowest level of the cavernous hangar on a quietly thrumming cushion of super-cooled air produced by *Dagger*'s idling engines.

A webway of various catwalks stretched here and there across the vastness of the hangar, connecting to an even more extensive system of catwalks and out-branching tunnels. It was here that workers and engineers worked at a breakneck pace to complete final preparations for *Dagger*'s maiden voyage: checking and re-checking diagnostics from external sensors throughout the hangar, loading infantry and other combat weapons into storage bays, wheeling massive carts filled with densely metallic sabot rounds that would be fired by *Dagger*'s thunderous array of four railguns.

Down below on the hangar floor, hundreds of Kiryuin Technologies' most elite shock troops were beginning to gather in neat columns and blocks, summoned near-instantly by Ryuko's authority as Warmaster. Officers (hand picked by Ryuko and her four elites) gathered at the head of each platoon of troops, barking orders and ensuring a seamless mustering before beginning the process of boarding into the *Dagger*'s troop compartments.

All in all, Ryuko was impressed at the intensely efficient operation, despite it's neck-breakingly urgent pace. Nevertheless, she knew that the events of the past twelve hours demanded it, even if they were only just in the midst of preparing for the *Dagger*'s first test flight.

A trial by fire's going to be the only thing she gets. Thought Ryuko, reaching her hand up to take another drag off her quickly dwindling cigarette. She barely had time to exhale before a voice from the doorway to the meeting room interrupted her, startling her from her reverie and causing a fit of hacking coughs.

"There are at least a thousand reasons I could give as to why you shouldn't be smoking in a place like this."

Ryuko turned to meet the familiar voice head-on, not at all surprised to see Satsuki through the tears in her eyes from the coughing fit. She was standing with her weight shifted to one side, hands resting comfortably on the curve of her hip bones and face drawn into a particularly motherly scowl of disapproval. Ryuko was a bit surprised that Satsuki was wearing a near-identical black combat uniform to hers, pocketed uniform pants neatly tucked into black leather combat boots with a black buttoned uniform shirt tucked into the trousers, the sleeves rolled up to bare some of her pale muscular forearms. Under one arm she carried her traditional white officer's cap and long white coat, and in the other hand she held *Bakuzan* .

"But, I don't need to tell you because you're well aware of the regulations. All I will say is that I love you and value your health, so please put it out." Satsuki said, pinching the bridge of her nose as she moved to set her belongings down at the head of the table and lower herself gracefully into the chair there, crossing one leg over the other and folding her hands in her lap. Ever the picture of grace and beauty, even in such plain clothes. Ryuko dropped the used cigarette and crunched it into the floor, crossing the small space between them and kissing Satsuki on the top of her head, briefly inhaling the heady scent of her lavender shampoo.

"I'm sorry. No more, I promise." Ryuko responded, removing her coat and officer's cap as well and sitting in the chair at the edge of the table next to Satsuki, absentmindedly rolling up her uniform sleeves to match as the door to the meeting room swung open once again and more of their trusted inner circle entered.

"I love you too, by the way." Ryuko whispered in Satsuki's direction as the rest entered, the two of them sharing weary smiles before stone-hardened expressions once again set themselves permanently on their faces. There was much work to be done and the time for genuine smiling was a long, long way off.

Those entering the room finished doing so and Nonon, Gamagoori, Inumuta and Sanageyama took places at the remaining chairs left at the long table, sharing silent nods and weary, stone-faced expressions. None of them said a word.

"Inumuta, tell us what we already know so far." Ryuko said, Inumuta nodding as he stood and triggered a drop-down projector screen at the opposite wall of the room with a tablet he was holding.

"As all of you are no doubt well-aware by now, twelve hours ago REVOCs Global Security CEO Takiji Kuroido was assassinated in broad daylight during a speech in Paris. The act was caught on video here and has since been seen worldwide by over a billion people." Inumuta explained, gesturing to the screen where a grainy video showed a large crowd gathered before a raised stage, behind which was the iconic image of the Eiffel Tower off in the distance.

Kuroido lay sprawled on the stage, the hole through his head clearly visible even through the shaky footage and now-screaming crowd. A woman in an impossibly pristine white dress and furs stood over him smiling, a pistol still smoking in her left hand. She gingerly held the weapon with two fingers by the trigger-guard before dropping it onto the stage next to Kuroido's body, as if it was a piece of refuse, no longer useful. She sauntered gracefully to the lectern, smiling out at the frantic crowd now clearly surrounded by hundreds of sickeningly familiar soldiers in skull-faced helmets. Her hair shone radiantly with the colors of the rainbow, a sight that made everyone in the room tense.

"Hello, citizens of Paris! I am Ragyo Kiryuin, but of course you and everyone else undoubtedly watching this around the world already knows that. Today, as you can see I have taken out the trash...figuratively speaking, of course. Consider yourselves all citizens of a new glorious empire with REVOCs as its base and me as its head from this day forward! Rejoice!, for those of you here will now have the pleasure of witnessing my power firsthand!" Ragyo finished, smiling devilishly.

At the snap of her fingers, the hundreds of REVOCs shock troops surrounding the crowd opened fire, cacophonous gunfire and Ragyo's cackling, amplified laughter the only sounds present on the video besides the numerous screams of the crowd. The camera fell, hitting the ground with a dull thud as it framed the macabre scene at a strange angle. Ragyo stood on stage, the Eiffel tower in the background, as she threw her head to the heavens and stretched her arms out in a Christlike pose, cackling laughter of unbridled insanity.

The video ended abruptly, leaving the room in a muted, tense silence. Sanageyama sighed weakly, running a hand though his messy green hair. Gamagoori nearly shook with rage, even Nonon looked white as a sheet.

"In the intervening hours, nearly every western government has made a statement condemning the action, but none so forceful as the United States." Inumuta continued, switching the video to a live news feed showing soliders in drab speckled combat uniforms running through preparations for mobilization. The headline read *UNITED STATES READIES FOR ALL-OUT WAR, PARIS IN CROSSHAIRS*.

"The American President announced his intention two hours ago to launch a full-scale invasion of REVOCs territories, beginning with a massive strike at their headquarters in Paris. The first regiments are expected to make landfall in the city within the next twenty-four hours. That is where we stand now." Inumuta finished, killing the video and returning to his seat quietly. All eyes in the room now rested uncomfortably and expectantly on Ryuko.

"I've thought long and hard about this, and while I hesitate to propose anything so drastic with this little info, I don't think we're gonna have a better opportunity than this, so here's our plan." Ryuko began, steepling her fingers in front of her carefully.

"We're taking the *Dagger* to Paris." Ryuko said plainly. Sanageyama shook his head, Nonon laughed and Gamagoori threw her a look that would have withered a lesser person. Even Inumuta looked on in wide-eyed disbelief.

"Frankly commander, that plan's a stretch even by *our* standards." Sanageyama said.

"The *Dagger* hasn't even completed advanced flight tests, let alone proven worthy of an entire combat mission." Inumuta added skeptically.

"I understand your concerns, but like I said, we're not going to have a better opportunity than this to eliminate Ragyo once and for all. We go in under the cover of the American invasion with a small force capable of slipping inside Ragyo's defenses and eliminate her and her 'empire' before it has time to do any real damage. Any objections, you're free to state them now." Ryuko finished confidently, leaning back in her chair and meeting the eyes of everyone in the room.

"Pardon my forwardness ma'am, but Lady Satsuki has remained silent throughout this entire discussion. Might we have the privilege of your opinion on the matter as well?" Gamagoori asked, the eyes of everyone now shifting to Satsuki sitting at the head of the table. She breathed deeply, mainting her position before speaking in a predictably measured and poised tone.

"I have confidence in Warmaster Matoi's plan despite the risks. It's a sound approach, and the American invasion can provide just the distraction we need to end this prolonged conflict once and for all. I would not have appointed Matoi head of our military branch if I did not believe her tactical prowess to be of the utmost capability." Satsuki finished, her praise warming Ryuko's heart and increasing her confidence tenfold.

"We've done the impossible a million and one times. Nothing says this can't be a million and two." Ryuko said, looking around the tables at the faces of her team.

"Oh, we're all in, Commander. We always are. We wouldn't be here if we weren't." Nonon said with a sidelong smirk, brushing a pink lock of hair away from her eyes. The rest of the team gave similar gestures of approval.

"Good." Ryuko said, standing and throwing her coat back over her shoulders and screwing her officer's hat down tightly on her head once more. "Gather your men and get to your stations, we leave ASAP."

"I'm sure Iori will be thrilled..." Inumuta said jovially as they all headed for the door.

The bridge of the *Dagger* was abuzz with activity as Ryuko and Satsuki entered, bridge hands and assorted officers in similar black uniforms saluting to them before returning to their duties with the quickest of pace. The bridge itself was a somewhat long, rectangular space with a large tactical holo-table at the rear in front of which sat the captain's chair, a large leather throne with tactical controls on either armrest and a holo-screen on the end of an omnidirectional stand attached.

Further forward a large open space, on either side of which sat four technician's chairs (two on each side) with numerous consoles and displays, terminated in a large, two-tiered front capsule. On the top tier, aligned height-wise with the rest of the bridge, sat the navigator and tactical officer's chairs and assorted consoles. Then, sitting a full meter downwards and forwards on their own separate section of the stair-step pattern design, sat the pilot and weapons officer's positions. The entire setup was enclosed front-wise by reinforced glass windows that allowed the entire bridge crew to see forwards along the bow of the *Dagger* and around almost 180 degrees.

Standing in the open space ahead of the captain's chair, Iori reviewed a tablet handed to him by a bridge-hand before nodding and handing it back, the black-uniformed ensign scurrying away as fast as he had arrived. Iori turned to Ryuko and Satsuki, adjusting the translucent orange mask over his mouth and fixing Ryuko with a sharp gaze.

"Commander, welcome aboard. All the shipboard systems are measuring at full capacity, however I must protest at this timetable. We haven't even completed advanced flight tests-" Iori began nervously before being cut off by a wave of Ryuko's hand.

"We're not going to get a better chance than this to hit Ragyo, Iori. You know that as well as I do, and you also know that the *Dagger*'s the most important weapon we have in our arsenal now. We're going ASAP." Ryuko stated matter-of-factly, fixing Iori with an equally intense gaze. The blonde-haired weapons scientist stepped closer quickly, lowering his voice and glancing back and forth nervously.

"I understand the gravity of the situation, however it is my professional opinion that this ship needs at least a week of intensive testing before even leaving Japanese airspace, let alone flying headlong into a hot combat zone. If we push the ship to its limits before we even know what those limits are, who knows what could happen?" Iori whispered.

Ryuko's gaze hardened even further, her features darkening as she stepped even closer to Iori, her whisper dripping with confidence and resolve.

"I believe in this crew and I believe in your abilities, Iori. Should some catastrophic situation arise, then I'll defer to your *amazing* improv abilities. We won't get a better chance than this, and we're going *now*. Do I make myself clear, Shirou?" Ryuko finished, her face morphed into a half-grimace, half-smile.

Iori shuddered at the use of his first name. Such a lack of informality could only mean that the commander's mind would not be changed. Sighing, he pinched the bridge of his nose and screwed his eyes shut, knocking his glasses askew.

"Very well, commander. Please take the bridge." Iori replied, straightening up and gesturing to the empty captain's chair.

Ryuko eyed the black leather throne hesitantly, catching an encouraging look from Satsuki as she peered in her direction for approval. Removing her coat and hat, Ryuko settled down into the large chair, Satsuki standing at her right flank, feet shoulder width apart as both hands rested on the hilt of Bakuzan, propped against the floor. Ryuko couldn't help but crack a small smile as she primed the tactical controls on both armrests, positioning the omnidirectional holo-screen before her.

Inumuta entered the bridge furiously working through data scrolling down a tablet he was holding, briefly looking up and nodding to Satsuki and Ryuko before he made his way down into the front capsule to the pilot's chair. Camera feeds on Ryuko's display showed his and the weapons officer's faces in crystal-clear detail as they settled into their positions.

"Iori, how's our newest copilot doing?" Ryuko asked.

"Ask him yourself, commander." Iori said, motioning to Ryuko's tactical display as he took his position at the tactical officer's station.

A familiar red and black single-eye pattern slowly faded into a corner of Ryuko's display, a deep voice rumbling pleasingly through the bridge address speakers.

"I am quite well, Ryuko. The *Dagger* is a fitting place for me to call my new home, even if it is a bit...cramped." Senketsu responded officially.

"Good to hear, although I'm sure it'll feel much roomier for you once we're out in the open air. Speaking of which, run a full shipwide systems diagnostic and open a comms channel, full shipwide address." Ryuko said.

"Channel open, Ryuko." Senketsu returned.

"Attention all hands:" Ryuko stated with booming authority. "This is Warmaster Matoi. I have taken command of the *Dagger* and have made our goals plain to my officers. We leave for Paris ASAP to drive a sword through the heart of REVOCs and end this long war once and for all. All hands to appropriate stations, all non-essential personnel proceed to safe zones." Ryuko finished, keying closed the comms channel on her chair controls.

"Senketsu, what's our status?" Ryuko asked.

"Shipwide diagnostic complete, all systems at full and all stations reporting green. Troop and supply loading complete. We are ready to fly on your order, Ryuko." Senketsu reported, the slightest hint of excitement in his voice as he spoke. Ryuko clenched the arms of her chair as she turned her gaze forward.

“Right. Senketsu, open the hangar doors. Inumuta, you have the controls. Bring us out.” Ryuko ordered, notes of acknowledgement from Inumuta and Senketsu coming back almost simultaneously.

The hangar doors split and slowly began parting high above them as a deep, resonant rumble made its way through the *Dagger*'s hull. Satsuki and Ryuko locked eyes as, slowly but surely, the *Dagger* began to climb away from its berth towards the open hangar doors directly above them. Satsuki gave her a nod, her face exhibiting such steel and fire of conviction that it heartened Ryuko to her very core. Ryuko nodded back, sneering and once again facing forward to take in the ever more magnificent view.

The *Dagger* cleared the hangar with ease, the sight of Kiryuin Technologies tower climbing past them framed by the rest of Tokyo's metropolis and the rays of the setting sun. An array of orange and yellows washed the bridge in their brilliant colors as the ship continued its climb, gaining some forward momentum as it climbed upwards in a slow, leisurely arc.

"How are we looking, everyone?" Ryuko called out to her bridge crew.

"All systems remain green, Ryuko." Senketsu intoned.

"We are cleared up to cruising altitude and out of Japanese airspace, commander." Iori said.

"The ship is controlling exactly as expected, ma'am." Inumuta called from the pilot's pit.

One by one, each of the bridge officers sounded off with positive results. Ryuko nodded in satisfaction, calling up more detailed data on her display and rearranging icons and data-streams to better suit her style of work.

"Alright. Inumuta, take us on one last circle around Tokyo proper as we ascend to cruising altitude, then set course for Paris. Everyone else, continue to monitor systems and report status every fifteen minutes." Ryuko ordered. Various calls of acknowledgement went up from the crew.

A full hour later, the *Dagger* was at cruising altitude and, having completed a circuit around Tokyo without major incident, they had set course for Paris post-haste. The sun had set by now and the glittering lights of Tokyo were behind them as the ship skimmed slowly over a grey bank of clouds like the Flying Dutchman over the glassy black seas of yore. Ryuko continued to monitor data on her tactical display, Satsuki having attended to the holo-table behind her, flipping through the latest satellite imagery and real-time maps of Paris. The situation was deteriorating there by the hour.

Engrossed in her data, Ryuko didn't notice Iori standing in front of her silently until he cleared his throat, startling her.

"Uh, yes Iori, what is it?" Ryuko stammered.

"Many apologies for disturbing you, commander. I merely wished to inform you that it will be some time until we have arrived in Paris, what with our current speed and dodging REVOCs anti-air defences as we go. Now more than ever would be a good time for you to retire to your quarters for a bit, perhaps get some much-needed rest." Iori said quietly, so that the rest of the bridge staff could not hear.

"Huh. Do I really look that tired?" Ryuko asked earnestly, prodding the tender areas under both eyes with her fingertips.

"Frankly commander, um...yes. You look a bit drawn." Iori said nervously.

Standing with a sigh, Ryuko stretched her arms above her head before retrieving her coat and cap.

"Alright. I'll only be a couple hours, but you let me know if there is even the slightest hiccup, yeah?" Ryuko said, jabbing a finger into Iori's chest.

"You have my word." Iori answered, adjusting his glasses.

"Good. You have the bridge!" Ryuko said so that everyone present could hear before throwing her coat around her shoulders, her cap loosely on her head as she exited through the automatic doors set into the back wall. Her coat fluttered behind her as she left, and as Iori looked flustered with his newfound responsibility, Satsuki merely cocked a concerned eyebrow after her girlfriend as she left the bridge.

Steam drove in wispy clouds around Ryuko, hot water spraying down onto her head with just the right amount of pressure. It ran down her back and over her breasts and stomach, caressing her legs as it made its way towards the drain. The shower was spacious, all dark granite and stainless steel. Ryuko stood under the lone, large showerhead, one hand propped against the wall as she hung her head and let the pleasingly steamy water do its work of relaxing her.

It was all pretty damn fancy for what amounted to a paramilitary hovership.

Ryuko turned around, letting the stream's pressure massage the back of her head as she ran both hands through her messy hair. She couldn't remember the last time she had had a good, long shower that was more for pleasure than for utility. Ryuko supposed as she turned back around to let the water momentarily splash on her face that this would help relax her; that keeping in mind what they were about to face, she could be allowed this last luxury, as it was to be expected. It was the sudden feeling of lithe, experienced fingers along the skin of her hips that was not, however.

Fingers running along hipbones to rest against the soft skin of her stomach.

Long arms wrapping themselves tightly around her waist.

Full breasts pressing into the top of her back.

The ghost of a kiss on the base of her neck, working its way like a ghost up and up to nip at an earlobe.

Such were the signs of Satsuki Kiryuin's welcome arrival.

"I thought you'd never...mph...get here..." Ryuko mumbled past a bitten lip as Satsuki firmly cupped one of her breasts, ministrations continuing on her neck in earnest.

"You of all people should know, *Matoi*. I always come right when I'm needed." Satsuki drawled, punctuating her statement with another earlobe nip.

"You, however...making you come is going to take some work." She added, Ryuko's insides churning with desire.

Satsuki turned Ryuko around forcefully, shoving her against the cold, granite wall with just enough force to make her elicit a noise of discomfort as the cold stone met her sensitive skin. Placing one hand on the wall and another on Ryuko's cheek, Satsuki kissed her passionately and deeply, their tongues fighting for control ferociously. Ryuko felt around the small of Satsuki's back, already slick with water, before descending to cup a firm buttock pleasingly.

A wet *smack* rang out in the stone room, Ryuko enjoying the feeling of smacking her open palm against the firm slab of Satsuki's rear end as a short and surprised moan emanated from Satsuki's mouth.

"I see..." Satsuki breathed before descending onto her haunches, muscles of her calves and thighs rippling pleasingly as she leveled her face with Ryuko's nether regions. The anticipation was almost too much for Ryuko as Satsuki buried her mouth between the folds there, the large blue pools of azure that were Satsuki's eyes staring back into Ryuko's from below.

For what seemed like hours, Ryuko was worked mercilessly by Satsuki, up and down and up again until at the point when she finally felt her climax rising up to meet her that she could barely even stand. The final crescendo was miraculous, the sauna-like temperatures in the shower space combining with a feeling of ecstasy so pure and intense that it was almost

perfectly like a dream. Ryuko's entire body shook, her knees wobbling as wave upon wave of intense pleasure filled her soul's cup to the brim and over. By the time it was over, Ryuko found herself sitting, back to the wall and legs splayed outward with Satsuki's muscular yet miraculously soft body sitting between them, Ryuko's front to her back.

"Rapturous as always, *Miss* Kiryuin..." Ryuko breathed into her ear, reversing roles and kissing Satsuki's neck as she wrapped her arms tightly around her waist.

"I aim to please. So, what now?" Satsuki asked humorously.

"Oh, I dunno...I think I'm gonna return the favor." Ryuko purred, moving her hands to cup Satsuki's impossibly soft breasts. They, like the rest of her, had been thoroughly soaked by the shower's hot waters, and as Ryuko ran her hands over them they created the most wonderful slippery sensation under her touch. Satsuki's breath hitched as one of her hands landed on Ryuko's legs, a firm grip giving her the go-ahead for further action.

One exploring hand was able to travel down Satsuki's flat stomach to the warm space between her legs, spreading and toying with the warmth there as the other hand worked up her neck, slowly worming a wayward finger into Satsuki's mouth to be swirled around by her tongue. Satsuki's breathing increased in intensity and small, deep moans began to escape from her mouth as Ryuko worked that finger around an erect nipple, cupping the breast pleasingly with the rest of her digits.

Her other hand was also hard at work, working circles furiously around the top of the warmth before plunging one, then two fingers inside it repeatedly. Satsuki made no concern for stealth now, letting Ryuko know just how good of a job she was doing by fully vocalizing her pleasure. Alternating wordless moans and calls of Ryuko's name echoed around the chamber as Ryuko slowly but surely brought Satsuki closer and closer to the edge.

"F-Fuck..." Satsuki said through clenched teeth, Ryuko relishing in her abilities as she brought Satsuki to a full climax, feeling her body shudder and stiffen under her touch. She would have to reprimand the CEO for such vulgar language.

Satsuki soon lay in a sweating, panting pool in Ryuko's arms, her mouth lolling open and cobalt blue eyes screwed shut in absolute exhaustion. Placing a sloppy kiss on her lips,

Ryuko smiled and proceeded to move Satsuki laterally to sit in her lap, placing another kiss on her cheek as she did so.

"You know you're quite the pottymouth when you come, Sats." Ryuko chided with a sly smile.

"You, Ryuko Matoi, are a pottymouth *all* the time so I think you have no high horse from which to speak." Satsuki returned with a smile of her own, the two of them sharing another kiss and languishing in each other's arms, trying not to think about what lay outside of these chambers.

This would be their last meeting like this for a long while.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to contact me on tumblr! vermillionairedj.tumblr.com

Soudain le Vide

Chapter Notes

> Again, I apologize for such a long wait between chapters but yes, I am still around and I am still writing on this work! Hopefully the length of this one makes up for the wait, and as always I hope very much that you all enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The *Dagger* was only on its maiden voyage, and yet Ryuko suspected that over the coming hours she would see more action than most warships had in the past fifty years. Striding purposefully down the narrow corridor, Satsuki at her side, Ryuko adjusted the gauntlet pieces of her PDR Mk. III until they felt comfortable around her forearms. The newest armor set in the Kiryuin Technologies line of Personal Defense Regalia would also be baptized by fire today, no doubt one of many new combat technologies seeing light on the battlefield below for the first time.

They had arrived over France no more than an hour ago, coming to rest roughly ten miles above Paris. Combat readiness sirens wailed every minute, signaling the imminent need for all crew to report to battle stations along with flashing red lights along each corridor of the ship. Uniformed personnel and armored shock troops swarmed around Ryuko and Satsuki as they rounded a corner, entering a long, slightly curved corridor that was one of six total, running parallel on the underside of the ship.

Every five or so feet along the left side of the wall, hexagonal hatches about as tall as the average person were situated for boarding the *Dagger*'s complement of one hundred drop pods. Each pod carried five fully-armed troops into battle, falling from the ship on sets of rails before reaching terminal velocity, then activating air scoops and retro-rockets to lessen the shattering impact of the ground coming up to meet them. Reaching the very last hatch at the end of the corridor, Ryuko and Satsuki saw that the rest of their squad was already underway with preparations.

Various mechanical noises pinged off the metal walls of the corridor as Sanageyama, Gamagoori and Jakuzure loaded ammunition, bolted on armor or attached extra ammunition and grenades to their suits using built-in electromagnets. All of them ceased this activity and acknowledged Ryuko and Satsuki's arrival with various states of attention. Ryuko stood and appraised them for several seconds before taking a deep breath and speaking in a calm, measured tone.

"At ease, everyone. How're we all feeling?" She asked plainly, retrieving her assault rifle from a panel set into the bulkhead and inspecting it. The noises of preparation resumed immediately.

“Scared shitless, but that wouldn’t be the first time.” Nonon said with an expression that was half grimace and grin, loading individual shells bigger than her middle finger into a rifle magazine. Sanageyama and Gamagoori looked relieved that she had spoken first, and had been so frank at that.

“Same, honestly. That’s good though, my vision’s sharper when I’m on my toes.” Sanageyama said, nudging Gamagoori in the ribs with his elbow jovially. Gamagoori, normally one for grandiose displays of retort, nodded resolutely without looking up from his work of loading belts of machine gun ammunition and explosive charges into his pack.

“This is the biggest operation we’ve ever had…but we won’t fail, Commander.” He grunted.

Twisting a suppressor onto the barrel of her assault rifle, Ryuko turned and met Satsuki’s steely blue eyes. She had more riding on the coming operation than possibly anyone else: not only the future of her company, but also the possibility of taking her torturous mother out of the world once and for all. Ryuko was unsurprised to find that, though Satsuki’s eyes were usually icy and appraising, a fire burned in them now that Ryuko knew all too well. Satsuki nodded slowly and surely, affixing Bakuzan in its gleaming white scabbard to her back as if for emphasis. Ryuko couldn’t help but smile, uncharacteristic pride welling in her chest.

“Well, to tell you all the truth I’m pretty scared too. But as Sanageyama said, fear keeps you on your toes as long as you don’t give into it. So let’s all remember this feeling when we’re walking out of Paris holding Ragyo Kiryuin’s head, yeah?” Ryuko said, punching her fist out in front of her as an invitation to the others. This time, they all smiled together as four other fists met her own.

“Commander? A word, please.” Iori’s voice cut through the din of the corridor over speakers set into the walls around them.

“Go ahead, Iori.” Ryuko replied, punching a button on a nearby panel and keying open their pod’s comm channel so they could continue preparations unhindered.

“Comms has just finished making contact with the American forces already in the area, and we’ve made our intent to help with the invasion clear. Airborne command aboard the airship USS *Richardson* has accepted, gratefully. Tactical is linked up with their network and sharing combat data.”

“That’s good to hear. What’s the situation on the ground?” Ryuko said, smiling briefly at how expected the outcome with the Americans had been. *This is too good an opportunity for them to say no*, Ryuko thought.

“Tactical has just completed a comprehensive scan of the battlefield in Paris proper, and it’s shaping up to be quite intense. Putting the map on your projector now.” Iori finished, a dense lens built into the floor between the five of them lighting up and filling the end of the corridor with a cool blue light. A map of central Paris hung between them in midair, spinning slowly.

“Several hours ago, the Americans landed in force about a mile south of the river Seine and have methodically pushed their way north ever since. This is who controls what territory as

of right now." Iori continued, the map changing colors. The Seine snaked through the middle of the diagram, everything south of it turning blue while everything north turning red.

"As you can see, the Americans have made some progress but stalled at the Seine. They're working on setting up temporary bridges as REVOCs forces destroyed all of the existing ones as soon as the invasion started, but they're having some difficulty. That's where we come in." The map zoomed in on a smaller area in central Paris, just north of the Seine: the 18th Arrondissement. A massive black circle blotted out about half of the district on the map.

"The 18th Arrondissement. The bulk of our shock forces will be landing in the eastern part of the district and will drive a wedge through the REVOCs forces north of the Seine, but you five obviously have a completely different mission. You will be dropping into La Fosse." Iori finished, letting the heavy French words languish in the air with a small sense of melodrama.

"La Fosse?" Sanageyama said, scratching the back of his head and looking lost.

"Monkey, do you seriously *ever* read the mission briefings?" Nonon spat, rolling her eyes.

"It's fine, just pay attention. Iori?" Ryuko said, motioning for Iori to continue. The map zoomed in even further, showing a massive pit in the ground. A cross-section appeared, detailing numerous subterranean levels and tunnels stretching off and away from the main shaft.

"Officially the "Sacre-Coeur Redevelopment Zone", but Parisians call it "La Fosse" or "The Pit". A decade ago terrorists destroyed the Sacre-Coeur church and, seeking revitalization the Paris city government approved plans for a massive 500-foot wide, half-mile deep subterranean complex of living, shopping, and work space on the site of the former church. Basically a self-sufficient underground city. Work was started and the hole was created, but after a severe economic downturn the project was abandoned and sat rotting away until REVOCs stepped in a year ago and bought it, making La Fosse their premier research and development facility. No one knows what's been going on inside since, but rumors range from live human experimentation to organ farming to chemical weapons research."

"Yeesh…" Sanageyama said with a long sigh, folding his arms across his chest. Everyone else nodded in agreement, apprehensive to say the least.

"Commander, would you like to take over from here?" Iori asked.

"Alright, here's the long and short of it. Ragyo's holed up in a fortified sub-basement at the bottom of this pit. Our pod takes a different trajectory, we enter the pit and fight our way down two levels to her hideout. We take her out and then return to the surface to regroup and assist with the rest of the invasion. Any questions?" Ryuko finished, turning to meet every one of her team members' eyes individually. She needed to be absolutely sure that everyone was at 100%. Probably more than that, considering this was probably the most dangerous mission any of them had ever been on.

The eyes she looked into contained nothing but stone, ice and steel. They were as ready as they ever would be, and they all knew it. Ryuko sneered and nodded her head in approval.

“Alright. Iori, brief the squad commanders-“ Ryuko began before Satsuki’s hand on her shoulder cut her off mid-sentence.

“Iori, open a shipwide broadcast channel please.” Satsuki said calmly, Iori acknowledging her with a mix of nervousness and reverence.

“Go ahead, Ms. Kiryuin.” Iori confirmed, a chill running down Ryuko’s spine as Satsuki drew herself to full height and inhaled a sizeable breath. Her speeches were utterly magnificent, if rare, and Ryuko felt privileged on behalf of all those aboard the *Dagger* that they would be able to hear one before going into battle.

“To all those aboard the *Dagger*, this is Satsuki Kiryuin speaking. I first wish to confer upon all of you my heartfelt thanks and congratulations for the hard work you have all dedicated yourselves to thus far. This ship and all those aboard her are part of such an incomprehensibly ambitious goal; one that we are one step closer to achieving by what we will do today. To those of you that will soon descend upon the battlefield below like hell’s fury itself, I give my utmost respect and admiration, and I look forward to fighting alongside you. To those that will remain here aboard the *Dagger*, I say this: keep her safe, and rest not until every one of your brothers and sisters are safely back on board. In mere moments we will all undertake the most significant operation in the history of Kiryuin Technologies; one that will decide the fate of the world at large. Do not allow yourselves to be ruled by fear, and be confident in doing your duties, for we are on the right side of history! Our enemies below do not know this yet, so let’s get down there and show them! Good luck.”

Satsuki finished her speech, stepping back as Ryuko and the rest looked on with awe. If they were warmed up before, they were now all on fire. Ryuko felt as if pure magma was running through her veins, confidence oozing from every pore. Satsuki certainly seemed to have that effect on people.

“Well said, Ms. Kiryuin. Commander, the squad leaders are being briefed now. From here on out I’ll be switching control of the drop to Senketsu. Good luck down there…all of you.” Iori finished, signing off with a barely masked tinge of nervousness on the edge of his voice.

“All combat troops to pods. All combat troops to pods.” Senketsu’s voice repeated in a loop over the drop pod area’s broadcast system. The hexagonal hatches built into one wall opened simultaneously with a hiss of decompressed air, revealing the cramped interior of each pod.

“Let’s do this.” Ryuko grunted, motioning for her team to begin embarking. Slides racked and magazines were slammed into receivers, final checks were done on weapons shipwide as hundreds of troops streamed into their respective pods.

Ryuko activated her suit’s cowl, the armored headgear folding effortlessly up and over her head, concealing it in a comfortably formfitting armored glove. The rest of her team followed suit, their specialized suits differentiated by the slight deviation in equipment and the placement and color of their glowing cowl optics: two blood-red circular eyes for Ryuko, deep blue jagged lines that met in a “V” shape liked a bird’s face for Satsuki, a single emerald green strip resembling a *hachimaki* headband for Sanageyama, three circular pink orbs arranged in a triangular shape for Nonon, and a single raised and shielded orange visor for

Gamagoori. Ryuko restrained the urge to laugh out loud as she took her seat in the pod, musing that they must look like hellish specters to whomever they would come across.

The pod's five seats were arranged in a neat circle, facing inward towards a central pillar of screens, switches and flashing electronics. Holoprojectors lined the floors and ceilings of the cramped pod, immediately activating upon the team's entry and syncing up with small cameras on the outside of the pod, relaying real-time images of the outside onto the surfaces inside. The effect was almost like floating in midair, though now the view was completely concealed by the pod's exit chute. Ryuko settled into her seat, pulling the harness down snugly over her shoulders. She remarked that it felt not unlike sitting on a roller coaster, though she hoped for her sake it was no less safe.

"Squad captains, please confirm go for drop." Senketsu's voice said, this time through speakers within the pod itself.

Ryuko did a quick visual scan of the pod's interior: her squad was secured, all weapons were safely stored, no loose items were present, none of the emergency seals had been cracked. They were good to go. Flicking a flashing green button on the central column in front of her, the pod's door snapped closed, leaving the pod's interior lit only by the flashing of electronics on the central column and the myriad holoprojectors scattered throughout. Two *thump*s were heard through the pod door, the loadmaster for this pod section running through a secondary confirmation. Ryuko banged on the door twice in kind, flashing a thumbs up to everyone else in the pod, the others answering in kind almost immediately.

"Good luck, Ryuko. Take care of yourself down there." Senketsu's voice said, this time through her suit's personal comms system. Hearing the AI's deep, mechanical voice was somewhat soothing to Ryuko, and one corner of her mouth curled up into a smirk.

"Thanks, Senketsu. I will. You take care of everyone up here, okay?" She answered.

"Of course, Ryuko. Your father would be very proud of you, you know." Senketsu finished, Ryuko a bit taken aback by how human he had sounded when saying that. It touched her much more than she thought it would, but she didn't have nearly any time to examine those feelings because it was no less than a second after their conversation ended that the pod began jostling around slightly in its tube, the doors at the bottom of the small shaft opening and filling the pod with sunlight.

"All pods are go for drop. REPEAT: All pods are go for drop." Senketsu's authoritative voice announced, Ryuko's heart beginning to race faster and faster. She found that her hands were clenching the restraints of her seat without consciously meaning to. The pod moved slightly downward on its rails to the drop position, the only thing sitting between them and the ground now a single set of release bolts.

"Drop sequenced finalized. Release set to internal countdown. Commencing." Ryuko heard Senketsu say, his voice as if coming down a long tunnel. Ryuko couldn't tell if that was just nerves or something else, but she tried not to think about it as a series of red lights around the top of the center column began counting down from five. Ryuko and the rest of her team stared at them, rapt, moments from oblivion.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. BEEP.

The final light turned green, and the world fell out from under them.

Ryuko was no stranger to falling from great heights. In her military days, she did more paradrops and HALO jumps than she could count on both hands. More recently, she recalled the fresh memory of plummeting from the penthouse level of the Takarada headquarters, broken glass and shell casings glittering around her as if in slow motion. It was a nerve-wracking experience for anyone the first time, but Ryuko had quickly become accustomed to and even began to like jumping off of immensely tall buildings or out of aircraft.

This, however…this was a completely different animal.

Daylight burst into the rapidly accelerating pod through the holoprojectors, the air around them incomprehensibly thin and clear at this altitude. Ryuko was afforded a breathtaking view of the drop as they fell away from the *Dagger*, the ship soon fading into obscurity far above them. A hundred other pods, all identical to theirs, spread out around them at slightly differing altitudes, their black metal hulls glittering in the bright sunlight. Looking far into the distance, Ryuko could see the curvature of the Earth clearly as the deep blue of the curved horizon faded beautifully into the inky blackness of space. Far below, dark clouds roiled across the distant French landscape, churning and massing like an angry god of old.

At first the scene inside the pod was strangely peaceful, the height of the drop meaning that as the pod fell through the very thin upper atmosphere, it would meet very little air resistance. But as it fell further and further into the atmosphere the pod began to decelerate as it met denser and denser air, making the interior of the pod rattle and shake. Ryuko and the rest were buffeted in their harnesses as the dense clouds rose up to meet them, the pod's air scoop deploying with an explosive *BANG* in order to slow their descent.

Entering the clouds, the pod might as well have been thrown into a different dimension. Sound and fury were all around as the small craft violently shook, throwing its occupants around helplessly within their harnesses. Torrents of rain whipped past, the only light available inside the pod now the dull glow of the electronics on the center column or the occasional violent crack of lightning. The hellish ride through the storm was over as soon as it began, but as the pod crested the other side of the storm and Paris came into view for the first time, part of Ryuko wished they had stayed above the clouds forever.

Despite the driving torrents of rain, fires accompanied by thick columns of inky black smoke rose like angry tendrils all over the city. Anti-aircraft fire and tracers lit up the streets and rooftops, zooming back and forth across the waters of the Seine like fiery sparks as American and REVOCs forces traded fire. A short burst of retro-rockets jostled Ryuko and her team suddenly in their seats, moving their pod off the standard course and towards the gaping

black hole of the Pit below them. She watched as the rest of the pods crested the bottom of the roiling clouds and faded further and further into the distance.

Ryuko was thankful that they had the element of surprise, and despite the visceral terror of falling through an angry storm in what amounted to a steel bathysphere, was even more thankful for the job the storm had done in providing them that advantage. Ryuko closed her eyes, willing the rest of her troops success in using that surprise to drive a spear through the REVOCs forces and win the day.

When she opened them again, all was pitch black.

A massive explosion ripped into existence below them, a column of fire shooting downwards and away from the pod as its retro-rockets fired in preparation for impact. The light from the rockets lit up the interior of the Pit around them; floor after floor in various states of abandonment flashed past as the pod continued to decelerate.

“Uuuh, Commander?!” Sanageyama’s incredulous voice cut through comms suddenly, Ryuko following his pointed finger downwards, her heart only having a split-second to jump into her throat.

“Oh, shit-“ Ryuko managed.

“Brace for impact!” Satsuki interjected quickly, her voice authoritative and calm despite the imminent danger.

Gripping her harness for dear life, Ryuko’s entire world was turned completely upside down as their pod smashed into a footbridge: half-constructed and built across the dark chasm of the pit at an angle, it hadn’t appeared on the original schematics, meaning the project must have been abandoned recently. The impact sent the pod tumbling end-over-end, debris along with smoke and fire from the still-burning retro-rockets flying and falling around them. Fifteen seconds counted down on the mission timer on Ryuko’s suit display, but it felt like three hours had gone by as the pod was rocked with a second impact, this one righting the pod as it slammed into the outer wall of the Pit.

Sparks and debris continued to fly up and around them as the retro-rocket spluttered out of existence, plunging them back into near-total darkness. Ryuko’s vision was shaking so badly that she doubted she would be able to see anything even if there *was* light, the only thing preventing the pod from a total freefall being the fact that it was grinding and lodging itself further and further downward into the outer wall, sparks flying and a horrific screeching of metal on metal ringing in everyone’s ears.

With about as much fanfare as the cacophonous racket started, another massive impact rocked the pod one final time, this one ending its trajectory and exposing the interior of the pod to massive g-forces. Ryuko felt blood pooling in her feet, her head feeling light and vision starting to close off. She tried to fight it, but the last impact had been unbelievably jarring.

In total darkness and feeling very isolated, Ryuko promptly passed out.

Ryuko started awake, head pounding with the sound of klaxons cutting sharply through the ringing in her ears. Flashing red light softly illuminated the inside of the pod, shifting between red and total darkness. Most of the electronics had deactivated themselves or been destroyed, and a thin veil of smoke hung in the air. Ryuko coughed before deactivating her restraints, retrieving her rifle from the rack next to her and using it as a makeshift cane to prop herself up into a hunched standing position.

“Report!” She sputtered, shaking her head to relieve some of the last vestiges of disorientation.

“I’m unharmed.” Satsuki said, pulling herself out of her seat slowly.

“Banged up, but I’ll live.” Nonon said, tapping her suit’s optics to clear them of dust.

“I am unharmed as well.” Gamagoori said, reaching below him and retrieving Sanageyama’s automatic shotgun, which had come loose during the crash, and handing it too him forcefully.

“I’m fine too, by the way. Anything know what happened?” Sanageyama asked, flipping his restraints up and racking the slide on his shotgun, tapping its drum magazine with the palm of his hand to make sure it was secure.

”Some kinda bridge, I think. Definitely wasn’t on the schematics we looked at. Satsuki, see if you can raise the *Dagger*. We need a sitrep if possible.” Ryuko answered. Satsuki nodded, looking down as she worked within her suit’s systems to open a new comms channel. She looked back up after several seconds and shook her head.

“I am unable to raise the ship. Our distance underground must be interfering with comms signals. It appears as if we are on our own.” Satsuki said gravely. Ryuko was disappointed, but unwilling to let it affect the mission. Determined, she racked the slide on her assault rifle, syncing the gun’s electronic sights with her suit’s display.

“Alright. Everyone be ready, I’m opening the hatch.” Ryuko said, turning to the flashing red button beside the hexagonal steel hatch. Hitting it with her fist, explosive bolts placed around the frame blew outward sending the door flipping away into the darkness.

Her cowl’s optics instantly adjusted to the dim lighting outside, giving Ryuko an immediate sense of vertigo when she realized they were still inside the massive, circular main chamber of the Pit, but definitely not on the lowest level. Their unplanned trajectory had apparently sent them careening into the face of the circular wall, grinding downwards about three hundred feet before coming to rest thirty feet above the bottom, lodged in the wall itself like an acorn barely hanging onto its branch.

The bottom floor of the Pit consisted of mostly dirt, molded into rough berms and mounds in certain places. Steel crates, loading and excavation machinery, transport vehicles and stacks of disused weaponry were scattered about, the ground wet and muddy in some places due to the driving rain far above them falling down the long shaft and running down the walls to pool on the lower levels. Far across the field from their pod was a huge blast door set into the wall, flanked by a raised guard tower on either side. From this distance, she couldn't tell if they were manned, but Ryuko didn't want to take any chances. They couldn't stay here any longer.

"Everyone out, now. There's gonna be a, uh…a bit of a drop. Make sure you get in cover as soon as you hit the ground." Ryuko said, motioning for her teammates to hustle.

"A 'drop'?" Nonon asked sarcastically, retrieving her folded sniper rifle from a compartment next to her.

"Yeah. Make sure you land right." Ryuko said, snickering sarcastically despite the dire situation.

With that, Ryuko launched herself from the hatchway. She hit the ground with enough force to leave a small crater, rolling expertly and sprinting into a crouching position behind a storage container. One by one, starting with Satsuki, then Nonon and Gamagoori, her team fell with varying degrees of grace from the pod, joining her in cover. As Sanageyama appeared in the hatchway however, the entire plan fell apart.

A bright floodlight coming from the direction of the blast door flipped on, framing Sanageyama in the pod's doorway perfectly. He was caught off guard, throwing an arm in front of his face to shield himself from the blinding light.

"*Shit.*" Ryuko muttered as she peered over the crate, looking toward the light's source and gritting her teeth. The blast door was slowly opening, an angry grinding sound reaching them across the large chamber as its two sides pulled further and further into the wall. Several skull-helmeted soldiers were pouring from the widening doorway, some entering the two defense towers while the rest took up defensive positions in various places in front. Shrinking back behind cover, Ryuko quickly tried to count how many REVOCs soldiers she had seen in order to form a plan. It was only a few more seconds until the gears in her head ground to a halt.

A small puddle of rainwater in the dirt in front of them was quivering, once every second or so. Dread pooling in the pit of her stomach, Ryuko slowly peered back over the crate to find their worst nightmare rearing its ugly head. The blast door was opened completely now, the space inside illuminated and revealing itself to be some sort of vehicle bay. In the center of the doorway, slowly making its way out on six massive steel legs, was a REVOCs Type III "Kumo" Spider Tank.

The tank was adorned in a deep black, the optical cluster situated between its two smaller forward-facing utility arms glowing a bright red. Behind the small "head" assembly, the much larger and bulbous "thorax" assembly was attached, supported on six powerful legs. Atop the thorax and, much to Ryuko's dismay, was a six-barrel high-caliber autogun. The

barrels were beginning to spin, the pilot of the tank targeting the pod lodged high above them in the wall. The pod with Sanageyama still inside.

“Sanageyama, get the *fuck* outta there!” Ryuko screamed, her head whipping around to see Sanageyama launch himself from the pod just as the tank opened fire.

He came down at an awkward angle, slamming into the ground behind them horizontally and throwing up a cloud of dust, dirt and mud. He coughed and grunted several times as he slowly brought himself up onto his elbows and then into a low crouch, moving with a pained gait into cover with the rest of them. At the same time, rounds from the tank were ripping into the pod, tearing gaping holes in its frame until debris and molten metal began to rain down in the space behind them. Seemingly satisfied with the destruction, the tank pilot ceased fire as the sound of the overheated autogun spooling down echoed through the large chamber.

“You alright?” Ryuko said, crouched down low in cover.

“Yeah…just got the wind knocked outta me. What’s the plan, boss?” Sanageyama returned, the chamber oddly quiet again. Ryuko peeked up over cover again, the REVOCs forces on the other side of the chamber readying their weapons but seemingly unaware of her and her team’s exact position. *Good, that gives us some time*, she thought.

“Satsuki, can you tell where we can get down to the other levels from here?” Ryuko asked. Satsuki nodded, activating a small hologenerator on her gauntlet and calling up the schematics of the Pit for all of them to see.

“It looks like the blast doors across the way are where we must enter to gain access to the lower levels. Inside is a vehicle repair bay, followed by a utility elevator bank. There’s no other way, I’m afraid.” She explained.

“Damn…alright. Looks like we’re doing this the hard way. First off, we can’t bunch up or that spider tank will tear us to pieces before we even realize it. We need to pick off the infantry as we move up so that by the time we get in close, we can out-maneuver the tank and disable it without having to deal with the small fries as well.” Ryuko began, using her finger to draw a rough, circular diagram in the dirt in front of her.

“Nonon you circle far out to the left *here*. Police those defense towers and make sure none of them flank us. Sanageyama, you’ll be middle left. Load up some slugs in that shotgun so you can take the infantry at range. Gamagoori, you drive down the center and lay down some suppressing fire on their main line so we can move up. Satsuki, you and Bakuzan are most equipped to take down the tank once we get close, so you’ll take far right and lob grenades into their ranks. Gamagoori has an extra belt of them in his pack, get them from him before you go. I’ll take center-right and drop as many of the infantry I can at range. Make sure every one of you moves as soon as you fire, or that tank will rip you a new asshole. Got it?” Ryuko finished, checking her assault rifle one final time.

They all nodded gave her the thumbs up, Satsuki tying the fresh belt of grenades from Gamagoori across her other shoulder. Nonon activated her fearsome sniper rifle with a press of a button, the barrel telescoping outwards and the scope popping up from its hidden

compartment with a series of snaps and clicks. A series of notches were crudely engraved into the stock, soon to be joined by several more. Sanageyama switched out magazines, taking Ryuko's suggestion and loading a round of fresh tungsten slugs perfect for long-range firing. They were all ready.

Ryuko counted down from three on her fingers, folding the last one down into a fist before bursting from behind cover with her teammates in a low sprint towards a backhoe slightly forward and right of their old position. Small-arms fire erupted from across the chamber, the REVOCs troops firing wildly as they tried to follow the impossibly quick movements of the power-armored KT squad. Sliding into cover behind the machine, Ryuko popped up into a crouch and aimed her rifle across the driver's chair, the electronic sights in the weapon synced to her suit's display showing distance, possible trajectories and environmental conditions.

Sighting down on a group of two REVOCs defense troops wearing their signature skull-faced helmets, Ryuko pulled the trigger in a series of short bursts and relished in the sight of their unsightly forms crumpling into the dirt a great distance away. Sliding back down into cover, Ryuko prepared to make her break for her next position as she heard her other teammates open up with their respective weapons, tearing into the REVOCs defense line with force very much disproportionate to their small numbers.

Ryuko bolted from cover again, rounds pinging off dirt and metal around her as she sprinted towards her next target. A REVOCs soldier manning a heavy machine gun emplacement was firing angrily at her, attempting to get a bead on her before his head snapped backwards and he crumpled to the floor, undoubtedly felled by a precision shot from Nonon far across the chamber. Ryuko made a note to thank her for that later as she slid into cover behind a broken down transport truck. Explosions shook the ground as Satsuki let fly with her first salvo of grenades, sending several commandos flying into the air.

Ryuko snapped around the side of the truck, rifle at the ready, letting off a few fresh bursts and taking two or three more targets before noticing that the barrels on the spider tank's main gun were beginning to spool up again. Hurling the empty magazine from her rifle, Ryuko sprinted from cover once again as she retrieved a fresh one from the magnetic strip along one of her thighs, slamming it into the receiver and racking the slide as she slid into cover yet again further down the line.

"Gamagoori, pop some smoke! The tank's spooling up again!" Ryuko advised, peeking around her new cover to get a bead on the tank.

"Acknowledged!" Gamagoori roared, pulling two thermal smoke grenades from his pack at once and pulling the pins with one finger, hurling them directly in front of the tank to cloud its vision. The thermal smoke, laced with microscopic chaff to confuse certain electronic sensors, would confuse the tank's ability to use its thermal cameras to sense their position.

However, this apparently didn't stop the pilot from trying.

A hot stream of tracers erupted from behind the wall of black smoke, piercing a wavy line through the billowing clouds as it moved from one side of the room to the other. Ryuko slammed back down into cover, small arms fire and the high-caliber rounds of the tank's gun

ricocheting off of or embedding themselves in objects around her. She only hoped the rest of her team had had the good sense to stay out of the tank's line of death.

Soon enough, the tank's gun overheated again ceasing the stream of deadly fire for another short amount of time. With renewed confidence, Ryuko and the others opened up once again, slowly inching their way across the massive chamber towards the blast doors, taking down more and more REVOCs troops as they did. After almost an hour of constant fighting and maneuvering and what had to be thousands of rounds of ammunition spent on both sides, Ryuko's squad was back within eyeshot of each other on the blast door side of the chamber.

The five of them were spaced out about two to three meters apart from one another, laying down a near-constant cone of overlapping fire on the remaining REVOCs troops. There were only five of them left, having retreated to the relative safety underneath the spider tank, the tank's pilot having placed two of the front legs together to form a crude barrier. As the tank's gun yet again went offline to cool down, the barrels steaming and red-hot as they spun slower and slower, Ryuko saw Satsuki begin to move off to her right. Springing from her cover behind a storage crate, Satsuki sprinted to another crate slightly in front of that one and vaulted over it, flinging the last grenade from her belt with such speed that Ryuko was hard-pressed to follow its trajectory.

The grenade flew through the air like a rocket and embedded itself halfway into the churned-up mud at the REVOCs soldiers' feet, just behind the bulky legs of the spider tank. As it exploded, its force was funneled downwards and outwards by the tank's frame, completely vaporizing the defense troops and leaving a charred, bloody mess on the underside of the tank that smoked and steamed with immense heat. Unfortunately, the tank with its thick armor escaped any major damage and moved its front legs back out into a defensive stance, hunkering down even further. To Ryuko's confusion, the front two utility arms swung down and plunged themselves into the dirt as if to try and provide even more stability, for a reason Ryuko failed to grasp.

Even more confusing (and now concerning) was the fact that the tank's main gun not only had stopped cycling, but had sagged downwards as if it had been deactivated entirely. A high-pitched whine began to emanate from somewhere within the tank, starting off soft and low and moving upwards in frequency and getting louder and louder.

"Something's not right-" Ryuko began, before the entire world was turned on its head.

The high-pitched whine ended with a large, deep-throated bass rumble as arcs of electricity snapped and popped around the tank's frame leaving singed concentric circles on the ruddy ground around it.

Ryuko felt like her head was going to explode. Her heart pounded in her ears as her vision hitched, lungs on fire with every pained breath. Her Personal Defense Regalia felt limp and heavy, the display inside her suit's cowl fizzing with interference. She writhed behind her cover, her vision turning white, her very existence torture. She had heard about this sort of phenomenon from troops cycling home from battlefields in China and Russia: REVOCs could and did, on multiple (but rare) occasions, deploy some kind of interference generator that not only could knock out sensitive electronics, but could send people writhing to the ground in prolonged agony.

Ryuko was on the edge of consciousness, what felt like hours and hours of constant, spasm-inducing pain and electronic interference frying her brain in its own juices. Just as she was convinced she was going to lose consciousness and (to her pain-addled mind) clearly hallucinating, a bright ball of fire and blinding light emanated from the direction of the tank, shards of armor and debris arcing up and over her and her squad's heads trailing thin grey wisps of smoke. Ryuko would have thought that she was dreaming and did for a few seconds, that is until she realized that the constant pain had ceased and the operating system for the visor in her suit was rebooting.

Muscles aching, Ryuko slowly crawled into a sitting position with her back against her cover once her suit had fully rebooted and power had been restored. Her head was swimming and pounding all at the same time, but she was eternally thankful for being free of such constant agony.

"Ugh…what the *fuck* was that?" Nonon said, her voice soft and raspy.

"Some sort of interference generator REVOCs has been testing over the past months. I was… unaware that they had successfully housed one inside a tank, however…" Satsuki replied, her usually husky voice barely above a whisper.

"I dunno if I would say successful…Matoi, you okay? You're gonna want to see this." Nonon said, her voice more incredulous.

"I'm fine…just gimme a second." Ryuko responded. Slowly shuffling to her knees and then standing, Ryuko turned to see the state the spider tank was in. At first from Nonon's assessment Ryuko thought that the generator had failed and destroyed the tank, but as she and her squad slowly moved towards the tank's ruined frame she realized the cause of its destruction was much different. A clean hole had been blown through the near side of the tank's "thorax" section, the hole on the other side of the thorax much bigger and more jagged, indicating an exit for some sort of projectile.

Sure enough, behind the tank and embedded in the wall was a solid metal round, about the size of a football and glowing red-hot as if fired with immense speed. Ryuko recognized the round and the destructive symptoms of its use, because surprisingly enough she had used the anti-tank weapon that fired it personally, more than once. That was a long time ago now, when she had trained with the US special forces. *What the hell could an American weapon be doing all the way down here…?* Ryuko wondered.

Puzzled, Ryuko turned her head and noticed that once she was looking at the blackness of the far-off outer wall of the Pit, she saw a faint trail of smoke and ionized air still hanging midair. It started near the entry hole in the side of the tank, and moved in a slightly upward trajectory over their heads and towards the Pit's outer wall. Eyes widening, Ryuko's-pain addled brain snapped back into reality, realizing the implication when the weapon's smoke trail ended one floor up from them in a perfect overwatch position.

Someone else was in here with them.

"Everyone weapons-ready now! There's someone else still in here with us!" Ryuko hollered into comms, her and the rest of their team members snapping their weapons up, facing

outward into the darkness. Only silence met them as they scanned the environment around them, smoke still rising from the tank and water dripping from a million and one different places around them.

The water… Ryuko thought, an idea suddenly popping into her head as she shifted her aim to the muddy ground several meters in front of them. Staring intently for any sign of movement, Ryuko finally caught it out of the corner of her eye and snapped her rifle around with neck-breaking speed to cover the movement.

A perfect, freshly made footprint had appeared silently in a puddle about fifteen meters in front of them.

“You there! I know you’re using optical camouflage, deactivate it and identify yourself immediately!” Ryuko said authoritatively, her voice projected through her suit’s external broadcast speakers. The rest of her team whipped their weapons around to face that spot as well, Satsuki slowly drawing Bakuzan from its scabbard with her right hand while she aimed her sidearm with her left.

In a split second, five mysterious figures flickered and then materialized out of thin air. They were all wearing full-body power armor, much like the suits Ryuko and her team were wearing but bulkier and more rudimentary. They each aimed various weapons at the KT squad, their armor painted with a digital pattern of dark and light greens, blues and blacks. The optics positioned just under their suits’ very traditional helmets were glowing a deep blue, and as Ryuko tried to take in as much as possible about the newcomers in their midst she tensed when she noticed a very key detail.

On each of their left shoulder pauldrons, small enough to be overlooked but not for someone who was looking for it, was the thirteen stripes and fifty-two stars of the American flag. Ryuko was even more shocked to find that the middle figure slowly took one step forward and responded to her using a voice that was *very* familiar.

“You first.”

Chapter End Notes

Some notes on the visual descriptions for some technology in this universe:

When first writing the hovership "Dagger", I was picturing something sort of like a fusion between the "Bebop" from Cowboy Bebop and the Naked Sol from Kill la Kill. Think 3/4 Bebop, 1/4 Naked Sol: Basically the Bebop but with a longer and pointier bow, obviously brand-new with a menacing black and red paint job and instead of a flight deck in front of the bridge/on top of the bow, a battery of four railguns. I'll leave what a railgun looks like up to your imagination.

As far as the vague description I give for the "cowl" on the Kiryuin Technologies "Personal Defense Regalia" (it's a dumb name, I know) just think the helmet on Isaac

Clarke's suit from Dead Space; the same basic principles but a significantly different visual style, obviously. For those of you who've never played Dead Space, here's a reference for you: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKpRkw-pUXw

Thanks as always for reading, and if you have questions about/would like me to further explain anything related to the lore or technology of this crazy universe I've somehow managed to create, please leave them in the comments below.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!